

A Seal of Faith: Rereading Paul on Circumcision, Torah, and the Gentiles

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ABSTRACT

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It is generally held that the Apostle Paul dismissed the rite of circumcision for Gentiles. This dissertation, however, offers a different perspective. Through examination of relevant sources regarding the role of circumcision in conversion along with consideration of Philo of Alexandria's depiction of Abraham as an exemplar of and for the proselyte, this project will suggest that Paul, in Rom 4:11-12, uses the example of Abraham in order to explain the value of circumcision for Jews as well as for Gentiles. It will be argued, moreover, that Paul's objections to circumcision, as found in Romans as well as in Galatians, Philippians, and 1 Corinthians, were not to the rite *per se* but rather to the notion that circumcision was necessary for entering the Abrahamic covenant, "becoming a Jew," justification, salvation, spiritual transformation, protection or identity in Christ. A case will be made, moreover, that in Paul's day there were two competing forms of circumcision and that Paul was opposed to the more radical procedure. Finally, divergences in Paul's handling of the topic of circumcision in different letters will be explained through attention to particular audience concerns.

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ABBREVIATIONS

Primary Sources

<i>Abr.</i>	<i>De Abrahamo</i>
<i>Ach.</i>	<i>Acharnians</i>
<i>A.J.</i>	<i>Antiquities judaicae</i>
<i>Av.</i>	<i>Aves</i>
<i>Bel</i>	<i>Bel and the Dragon</i>
<i>B.J.</i>	<i>Bellum judaicum</i>
<i>Bib. hist.</i>	<i>Bibliotheca historica</i>
<i>b. Ned</i>	<i>Nedarim</i>
<i>C. Ap.</i>	<i>Contra Apionem</i>
<i>Cher.</i>	<i>De cherubim</i>
<i>Civ.</i>	<i>De Civitate Dei</i>
<i>Claud.</i>	<i>Divus Claudius</i>
<i>Deus</i>	<i>Quod Deus sit immutabilis</i>
<i>Dial.</i>	<i>Dialogus de oratoribus</i>
<i>Disc.</i>	<i>Discourses</i>
<i>DSS</i>	<i>Dead Sea Scrolls</i>
<i>Epigr.</i>	<i>Epigrammata</i>
<i>Gen Rab</i>	<i>Genesis Rabbah</i>
<i>Geogr.</i>	<i>Geographica</i>
<i>Germ.</i>	<i>Germania</i>
<i>Her.</i>	<i>Quis rerum divinarum heres sit</i>
<i>Hist.</i>	<i>Historiae</i>
<i>Jub.</i>	<i>Jubilees</i>
<i>Jdt.</i>	<i>Judith</i>
<i>LXX</i>	<i>Septuagint</i>
<i>1 Macc</i>	<i>1 Maccabees</i>
<i>2 Macc</i>	<i>2 Maccabees</i>
<i>4 Macc.</i>	<i>4 Maccabees</i>
<i>Mos.</i>	<i>De vita Mosis</i>
<i>Migr.</i>	<i>De migratione Abrahami</i>
<i>MT</i>	<i>Masoretic Text</i>
<i>Num Rab</i>	<i>Numbers Rabbah</i>
<i>Odes Sol.</i>	<i>Odes of Solomon</i>
<i>Pirqe R. El.</i>	<i>Pirqe Rabbi Eliezer</i>
<i>Plut.</i>	<i>Plutus</i>
<i>Praem.</i>	<i>De praemiis et poenis</i>
<i>Praep. ev.</i>	<i>Praeparatio evangelica</i>
<i>QE</i>	<i>Quaestiones et solutions in Exodum</i>
<i>QG</i>	<i>Quaestiones et solutions in Genesin</i>
<i>Sat.</i>	<i>Satirae</i>
<i>Somn.</i>	<i>De Somniis</i>

Spec.
T. Mos.
Virt.

De specialibus legibus
Testament of Moses
De virtutibus

Secondary Sources

BDAG	Bauer, W., Willian Danker, W.F. Arndt, and F.W.Gingrich. Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and other Early Christian Literature
GLAJJ	Stern, Menachem. Greek and Latin Authors on Jews and Judaism
<i>JBL</i>	Journal of Biblical Literature
<i>JSJ</i>	Journal for the Study of Judaism in the Persian, Hellenistic, and Roman Period
<i>JTS</i>	Journal of Theological Studies
LCL	Loeb Classical Library
LSJ	Liddell, H. G., R. Scott, H. S. Jones, Henry, A Greek English Lexicon. 9th ed. with revised supplement. Oxford 1996. A Greek-English Lexicon
<i>NTS</i>	New Testament Studies
OED	Oxford English Dictionary
Str-B	Strack-Billerbeck

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For Appa, Amma, and Geetha

and

in memoriam

Alan F. Segal,

z"l

Chapter 1

Introduction

1. Statement of the Question

With the passing of nearly 2,000 years, one might imagine there would be little left to write concerning the Apostle Paul. Nevertheless, it seems that the ecclesiastical maxim regarding the lack of end to the “making of many books” (Ecc 12:13) might aptly apply to the production of books on Paul and various aspects of his epistles alone. There are, of course, good reasons for this. For one, Paul occupies a special place in history. Though Jesus of Nazareth may be considered the figure most central to the Christian faith, Paul of Tarsus is often esteemed as the figure most pivotal in proclaiming Jesus to the world. Paul, moreover, is not always the easiest writer to penetrate. His statements often seem obscure or contradictory. These factors have kept scholars, theologians and lay people alike continually grappling with various aspects of his letters,¹ often not without some degree of grief and frustration.

Yet, perhaps the apostle might be forgiven for this. After all, he himself, presumably, had no idea that his words would have such an enduring and formidable afterlife. Also, from what may be discerned, Paul himself seems to have grappled with multiple and, perhaps, consternating issues in his letters. He addressed specific yet multi-faceted communities attempting to hammer out a variety of matters and bring those under his care (and, perhaps to some extent, even those outside of it!) in line with his particular understanding of the scriptures and

¹ Apparently from an early date! See 2 Pet 3:15-16.

gospel of Christ. It is with some sympathy then for the complexity and immediacy of the problems he faced, that I seek to understand Paul's position on one of the most contentious subjects with which he dealt - the matter of circumcision.

My question, in essence, is as follows:

What were Paul's views regarding the circumcision of Gentile believers in Jesus? Was he, in every instance, opposed to the rite for Gentiles?

At first blush, the question may seem somewhat curious. After all, while scholars certainly do diverge, even widely, on the question of whether or not Paul expected his fellow Jews to maintain circumcision, on the question of whether or not he expected *Gentiles*² to be circumcised, there seems to be general consensus that Paul's answer was a resounding "No." Thus, for example, John Gager, in *Reinventing Paul* states the following:

Within the movement, the hotly debated questions were whether Gentile followers of Jesus needed to become Jews, that is, whether male members needed to undergo circumcision. Did Gentile followers need to observe the Torah, the law of Moses? Paul's answer was unequivocal – Gentiles were not required to adopt circumcision or to follow the Jewish law.³

² The term "Gentile" is capitalized here since the "Gentiles" are taken, in this context, to refer to a *specific* rather than a generic group of people (that is, to those who are not of Jewish descent).

³ John G. Gager *Reinventing Paul*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 26. Krister Stendahl states, even more strongly: "it is very clear that Paul solves the problem of circumcision in a much more radical way than in his treatment of the problem of dietary laws. The circumcision of Gentiles is under no circumstances to

As may be seen, Gager asserts that Paul's position on the matter of Gentile circumcision was "unequivocal." What I hope to raise here, however, is not so much the possibility that Paul had an unclear or ambivalent view of Gentile circumcision but rather that his views on this topic may have been much more qualified and complex than generally held.

The aim of this chapter is to highlight the basic challenge in reading Paul on the topic of circumcision and to review some of the lines of argument that have been advanced, particularly in recent decades, concerning Paul's treatment of the rite. The second half of the chapter will present the particular approach used in the project as well as an outline of its overall structure.

2. The Problem

A well-noted and major difficulty in parsing Paul's view on the law is that he makes various and seemingly conflicting statements regarding it.⁴ Thus, for example, in Romans Paul states: "Do we therefore overthrow the law by faith? By no means! Rather, we establish it" (Rom 3:31). Yet, later in the same epistle he says the following: "For Christ is the end of the law so that all who have faith may be justified" (Rom 10:4). So does Paul then consider the law established or finished? While, admittedly, these verses are taken out of their fuller context, they give some taste of the difficulties involved.

be accepted." (Krister Stendahl, *Paul Among Jews and Gentiles* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1976), 19).

⁴ See, for example, discussion by Gager, *Reinventing Paul*, 4-7.

Similar challenges arise with Paul's treatment of the rite of circumcision. In Romans, for example, Paul presents the following query and response: "or what is the value of circumcision? Much in every way!" (Rom 3:1-2). Yet, in 1 Corinthians he seems to give specific instruction for those in Corinth to remain uncircumcised (1 Cor 7:17-20). Moreover, he warns the Galatians: "Now I, Paul, tell you that if you become circumcised, Christ will be of no value to you!" (Gal 5:2). Finally, in Philippians, Paul seems to refer to circumcision as a "mutilation" (Phil 3:3). Does the apostle then view physical circumcision as having value or as a form of mutilation that, if taken, would result in a complete negation of the value of Christ? How is he to be understood?

Scholars concerned with Paul's treatment of the Mosaic law as well as with the relationship of the Gentiles to Israel or the Jewish people have offered various strategies for making sense of Paul on the topic of the circumcision. Some of the most important of these will be reviewed in the next section.

3. Review of Some of the Major Lines of Scholarly Argument

3.1 Two People - One Law – With Circumcision No Longer Required of the Jew or the Gentile⁵

3.1.1 Physical circumcision was fulfilled in Christ through the new covenant, the giving of the holy spirit and “circumcision of the heart”

One significant line of interpretation to be considered is that Paul understood physical circumcision to have been fulfilled with the advent of Christ through the “new covenant” and “circumcision of the heart.” Thomas Schreiner, for example, states the following:

According to Paul, the Mosaic covenant has reached its fulfillment in Jesus Christ. This fulfillment means that the Mosaic covenant no longer is in force. The age of consummation and the era of the new covenant have arrived. The commandments in the Mosaic law are still part of the Word of God, but they no longer function in the same way now that the fulfillment of what the Old Testament promised has come. For example, physical circumcision pointed to the spiritual circumcision of the heart, and the reality of the latter displaces the need for the former.⁶

⁵ In terms of the headings for this section, it should be noted that the phrase “Two People” signifies the general scholarly understanding or assumption of two separate corporate identities - Jews and Gentiles - distinct, for the most part, in terms of physical lines of descent. The work of Jason Staples somewhat problematizes this distinction. Moreover, “circumcision,” refers here to physical circumcision and not “circumcision of the heart” (there seems to be general agreement that Paul would have expected all believers in Christ whether Jew or Gentile to be circumcised in heart – the point of divergence concerns the matter of physical circumcision).

⁶ Thomas Schreiner, *The Law and Its Fulfillment* (Grand Rapids: Baker

As may be noted, Schreiner here suggests that Paul considered the Mosaic covenant to have been “fulfilled” with the advent of Jesus Christ and the “new covenant.” The phrase “new covenant” is found, of course, in the book of Jeremiah (31:31-34). 2 Cor 3:6 does, indeed, seem to indicate that Paul understood the “new covenant” of Jer 31:31-34 to have been fulfilled with the advent of Jesus Christ.⁷ As may be seen above, however, by “fulfill” Schreiner suggests that Paul considered physical circumcision to have been “displaced” by that to which it had always referred - “spiritual circumcision of the heart.” To make the case for such a reading, Schreiner offers the following:

What physical circumcision pointed to has been fulfilled in Christ. The circumcision of the heart, to which Moses and Jeremiah referred (Deut. 10:16; 30:6; Jer 4:4), has become a reality with the gift of the Holy Spirit (Rom 2:28-29; Phil. 3:3). The fulfillment inaugurated by Jesus Christ means that the literal rite is left behind and what the rite pointed to is now embraced.⁸

Books, 1993), 244. The passage continues as follows: “Old Testament sacrifices pointed to the sacrifice of Christ, which definitively accomplishes what Old Testament sacrifices merely anticipated. Neither are the purity laws incumbent on the church, since they signaled a need for holiness that is now a reality through the work of Jesus Christ.”

⁷ Schreiner, *The Law and Its Fulfillment*, 82.

⁸ Schreiner, *The Law and Its Fulfillment*, 166.

Here, Schreiner highlights Deut 10:16 and 30:6 as well as Jer 4:4. All three verses specifically mention circumcision of the heart. Moreover, drawing upon Rom 2:28-29 and Phil 3:3, verses in which Paul seems to suggest that true circumcision is of the heart or spirit, Schreiner concludes that Paul considered circumcision of the heart to have become a “reality” with the “gift of the Holy Spirit.”⁹ Again, Schreiner sees circumcision of the heart, “inaugurated by Jesus Christ,” to have *displaced* physical circumcision. Schreiner, moreover, understands Paul’s treatment of the law to fall partly within the framework of Judaism but partly outside of it.¹⁰

Frank Thielman similarly argues that Paul considered physical circumcision to have been fulfilled in the “eschatological age of the Spirit.”¹¹ Thielman, however, understands Paul’s interpretation of circumcision to fall well within the framework of Judaism of his time. In his view, Paul “argues within the conceptual world of Hellenistic Judaism that the eschatological age predicted by the scriptures has arrived.”¹²

⁹ Schreiner, *The Law and Its Fulfillment*, 164-66.

¹⁰ Schreiner, *The Law and Its Fulfillment*, 176.

¹¹ Frank Thielman, *From Plight to Solution* (Eugene, Oreg.: Wipf & Stock, 1989), 59.

¹² Thielman, *From Plight to Solution*, 59.

3.1.2 Circumcision as a source of Jewish “national boasting” or as a “badge of superiority” lifted as a means to include the Gentiles

A different approach is seen in the work of a key proponent of the “New Perspective,” James Dunn.¹³ As with Schreiner and Thielman, Dunn likewise holds that Paul had perceived a change with the coming of Christ. In Dunn’s view, the coming of Christ signaled a fulfillment of the covenant in which the primacy of the identity marker of “faith” was reasserted over that of physical circumcision:

to maintain such identifications was to ignore both the way the covenant began and the purpose it had been intended to fulfill in the end. To continue to insist on such works of the law was to ignore the central fact for Christians, that with Christ’s coming God’s covenant purpose had reached its intended final stage in which the more fundamental identity marker (faith) reasserts its primacy over against the too narrowly nationalistic identity markers of circumcision, food laws and Sabbath.¹⁴

In contrast to Schreiner and Thielman, Dunn suggests that Paul considered the problem with physical circumcision to be that it had become, for the Jewish people, a too “narrowly nationalistic” “identity marker.” Reflecting, for example, upon Paul’s comments in Romans, Dunn states the following:

¹³ Dunn is often credited with founding the “New Perspective.” The phrase “new perspective” is found, however, in Stendahl’s seminal article, “Paul and the Introspective Conscience of the West” (included in *Paul Among Jews and Gentiles*, 78-96). Dunn himself acknowledges Stendahl’s mention of the phrase. See James Dunn, *The New Perspective on Paul* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 2008), 7 n. 24.

¹⁴ James Dunn, *The New Perspective on Paul*, 114.

when Paul affirms that boasting is excluded in 3.27, he is not thinking of boasting in self-achievement or boasting at one's good deeds. It is the boasting of the Jew which he has in mind – the boasting in Israel's special relationship with God through election, the boasting in the law as the mark of God's favour, in circumcision as the badge of belonging to God (Rom 2:17-29).¹⁵

As may be seen, Dunn considers circumcision of Paul's time to have been a matter of "boasting" and a "badge of belonging to God." In Dunn's view, since Paul did not similarly dismiss baptism, the problem with circumcision could not have been that it was a ritual or ceremonial requirement.¹⁶ Rather, he posits, Paul considered circumcision problematic in that it had become "Israel's boast."¹⁷

It may be noted that there is a particular divide between these two sets of scholars (Schreiner, Thielman et al. vs. Dunn and others of the "New Perspective") in terms of their respective understandings of the heart of the problem addressed by Paul. The former understand Paul to be addressing the fulfillment of the Mosaic law, while the latter understand Paul to have been concerned with the fulfillment of the law and the covenant but focused, particularly, on the inclusion of the Gentiles. They also differ in their respective definitions of the "works of the law." The former consider the phrase to have a more general sense while the latter see Paul as using the phrase in a wider sense but also in a more specific way to reference laws that

¹⁵ Dunn, *The New Perspective on Paul*, 117.

¹⁶ Dunn, *The New Perspective on Paul*, 115.

¹⁷ Dunn, *The New Perspective on Paul*, 119.

distinguished Jews from Gentiles. Ultimately, however, both sets of scholars mutually understand Paul to have seen some type of *fulfillment* by Christ of what had been intended by God from the beginning - namely, circumcision of the heart of both Jews and Gentiles and an end to the practice of physical circumcision.¹⁸

3.2 Two People – Two Laws or Different Applications of the Law – With Circumcision Required of the Jew but *not* of the Gentile

3.2.1 Two gospels and covenants - one for the circumcised (Israel) and another for the uncircumcised (Gentiles) - the Gaston- Gager Thesis

Focus on the question of Gentile inclusion takes another turn with the work of Lloyd Gaston. Gaston argues that Paul, along with the Apostle Peter, understood there to have been not one but two different gospels: one for the circumcised and one for the uncircumcised. Gaston sees evidence for this in the two distinct missions of Paul and Peter:

Evidently they agreed on two gospels, one to the circumcised and one to the uncircumcised and on two apostolates, one to the circumcised and one to the uncircumcised. One can further infer an agreement that the circumcised would continue to obey the commandments of the Torah (cf. [Gal] 5:3; 1 Cor 7:18), while the uncircumcised would be responsible for none of them.¹⁹

¹⁸ Although Schreiner and Thielman may differ on discrete points, they mutually and explicitly affirm Lutheran and Reformation readings of Paul (particularly with regard to the meaning of the “works of the law”). They are thus, along with others, sometimes referred to as proponents of the “Lutheran” view.

¹⁹ Lloyd Gaston, *Paul and the Torah* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1987), 110.

Although he does not state so above, it should be noted here that Gaston equates the “circumcised” with Israel and the “uncircumcised” with the Gentiles. Presumably therefore, in his view, Paul would have expected Israel to continue with obedience to the “commandments of the Torah” including, of course, the commandment regarding physical circumcision, while the Gentiles would not. It may be further noted that, as a corollary to the “two gospels,” Gaston reads Paul as having considered there to have been “two covenants,” one for Israel and one for the Gentiles.²⁰

John Gager, explicitly drawing upon the work of Gaston²¹ likewise adheres to the “two covenant” approach. He similarly suggests that Paul never advocated abrogation of the Torah for the Jews. In Gager’s view, Paul’s negative comments regarding the law pertain to his discussions regarding the Gentiles.²² As quoted earlier, Gager states the following regarding the question of Gentile observance of the law and circumcision:

Did Gentile followers need to observe the Torah, the law of Moses? Paul’s answer was unequivocal – Gentiles were not required to adopt circumcision or to follow the Jewish law²³

²⁰ “whether Gentile Christians keep one commandment or many...they exist in a covenant and commandment relationship to God which is different from but parallel to that of Sinai” (Gaston, *Paul and the Torah*, 32).

²¹ See John Gager, *The Origins of Anti-Semitism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983).

²² Gager, *Reinventing Paul*, 53.

²³ Gager, *Reinventing Paul*, 26.

As may be observed above, Gager seems to equate the "Torah" with the "law of Moses." When, however, describing what it is that the Gentiles are *not* to follow, he uses the term "Jewish law." In other words, in Gager's view, Paul understood the command regarding circumcision to be *Jewish* and not Gentile law.

3.2.2 The Torah (including circumcision) for the Jews; the Noachide law or a set of laws akin to the Noachide law (without circumcision) for the Gentiles

As mentioned earlier, Paul in 1 Cor 7:17-20, seems to direct those who were uncircumcised to remain uncircumcised. The difficulty, however, is that he also asserts that the "keeping of the commandments is what matters." Since circumcision is one of the commandments of the law, how may Paul be understood?

Peter Tomson, highlighting this dilemma, remarks the following:

The solution is simple but profound. Paul can only mean that gentiles should obey commandments also, although evidently not the same ones as Jews. He views gentiles as included in the perspective of the Creator which involves commandments for all. In other words: he envisages what elsewhere are called Noachian commandments.²⁴

Tomson here points to the "Noachian commandments" or Noachide laws. He suggests that Paul understood the Gentiles to be responsible only for these 7

²⁴ Peter Tomson, *Paul and the Jewish Law* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1990), 271.

commandments,²⁵ commandments that do not include a mandate regarding physical circumcision.

One difficulty, however, with this view is that the earliest undisputed articulation of the Noachide laws is found only after the time of Paul in rabbinic literature of the *tanaaitic* period. In light of this, Markus Bockmuehl in his work, *Jewish Law in Gentile Churches*, while positing, on this score, essentially the same view as Tomson, qualifies that Paul considered the Gentiles subject to a *pre-rabbinic* articulation of the Noachide laws.²⁶

Mark Nanos, meanwhile, similarly asserts that Paul was not confronting Judaism but rather addressing, more specifically, the “gentile question.” That is, how were the Gentile believers in Christ to behave in the “context of the Jewish communities”?²⁷ As with Dunn, Nanos suggests that the phrase “works of the law” refers to a set of laws including circumcision that specifically distinguished Israel from the nations. In marked contrast to Dunn, however, Nanos argues that Paul would have viewed these observances not as problematic “badges” of national “boasting” but rather as special “privileges”²⁸ given by God to the Jewish people. In Nanos’ view, Paul believed that these particular privileges did not extend or apply to the Gentiles but continued to have application for the Jews.

²⁵ The 7 Noahide Laws include 6 prohibitions (against idolatry, murder, theft, sexual immorality, blasphemy and against eating the flesh taken from an animal while it is alive) together with a positive command to establish courts (separate from those of the Jews).

²⁶ Markus Bockmuehl, *Jewish Law in Gentile Churches* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2000).

²⁷ Mark Nanos, *The Mystery of Romans* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996).

²⁸ Nanos, *The Mystery of Romans*, 9.

For Nanos, an interpretive key is Paul's appeal to the *Shema* in Rom 3:29-4:35 and 10:12-13.²⁹ Regarding this, he comments:

To insist that gentiles must become Jews in order to be part of the people of God is to contradict the Jewish assertion that the One God of Jews was also the One God of non-Jews, of all creation.³⁰

It seems that, in Nanos' view, if all the Gentiles in Paul's communities had become circumcised, they would have all become Jews (and thereby forfeited their Gentile identity). This, however, would not reflect the nature of the "One God" who had always been equally God of the Jews and God of the Gentiles. As with Tomson and Bockmuehl, Nanos holds that Paul expected Jews to maintain circumcision and Torah while the Gentiles were to follow the Noachide laws (or "some form of the apostolic decree").³¹

²⁹ Nanos, *The Mystery of Romans*, 9.

³⁰ Nanos, *The Mystery of Romans*, 9-10.

³¹ Nanos, *The Mystery of Romans*, 9-10. See also Pamela Eisenbaum, *Paul was not a Christian* (New York: Harper Collins, 2009). Eisenbaum does not substantively engage the question of Gentile circumcision. She notes, however, that circumcision is what "distinguishes a Jew from a Gentile" (Eisenbaum, *Paul was not a Christian*, 97). She argues, moreover, that according to Paul, God included both Jews and Gentiles into his "family" albeit via two different systems: Jews were expected to maintain the Torah, while Gentiles were not. She terms this the "radical new perspective" (Eisenbaum, *Paul was not a Christian*, 250).

3.2.3 The Mosaic Law with Different Applications for the Jew and the Gentile or Gentiles Included in Israel's Worship without "Becoming Jews"

Meanwhile, Stanley Stowers noting, for example, Paul's statement in Rom 3:1-2 (that the value of circumcision is "Much in every way") understands Paul to have considered the Mosaic law of on-going though differing application for the Jew and Gentile. He likewise considers physical circumcision, in Paul's view, to be applicable to the Jew but not the Gentile.³²

Paula Fredriksen, taking another angle, suggests that Paul considered the Gentiles to have been made "holy" through the "Spirit" or "Christ"³³ and to have been included in "*Israel's* worship."³⁴ Yet, she claims that Paul also "insists adamantly," that Gentiles "should not become Jews."³⁵ Elsewhere she argues that there is no apocalyptic expectation regarding the physical circumcision of Gentiles in the Bible from which Paul might have drawn³⁶ and that Paul would have understood that the very purpose of circumcision was to maintain a boundary between Jew and Gentile.³⁷

³² Stanley K. Stowers, *A Rereading of Romans: Justice, Jews, & Gentiles* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994), 154.

³³ Paula Fredriksen, "Paul, Purity, and the *Ekklesia* of the Gentiles" in *The Beginnings of Christianity: A Collection of Articles* (ed. Jack Pastor and Menachem Mor; Jerusalem: Yad Ben-Zvi, 2005), 205-217.

³⁴ Fredriksen, "Paul, Purity, and the *Ekklesia* of the Gentiles," 216.

³⁵ Fredriksen, "Paul, Purity, and the *Ekklesia* of the Gentiles," 216.

³⁶ Paula Fredriksen, "Judaism, the Circumcision of Gentiles, and Apocalyptic Hope: Another Look at Galatians 1 and 2" *JTS* 42 (1991): 532-64.

³⁷ Paula Fredriksen, "Judaizing the Nations: The Ritual Demands of Paul's Gospel" *NTS* 56 (2010): 232-52.

3.3 Two People – Two Laws - With Circumcision as Optional for the Jew and Prohibited for or Not Applicable to the Gentile

A well-recognized watershed in Pauline studies came with the publication of E.P. Sanders, *Paul and Palestinian Judaism*.³⁸ In this work, Sanders presents sharp criticism of New Testament scholarship of the time, arguing that Christian scholars had completely mischaracterized ancient Judaism as a religion that insisted on good deeds to earn God's favor, that is, as a "religion of merit." In the vast majority of the work, Sanders reviews various Jewish sources attempting to clarify ancient Judaism as a religion for which the concept of "grace" was integral.

In so doing, Sanders introduced the term "covenantal nomism." This, he offered, is the most apt characterization of the "pattern of religion" of Judaism in Paul's day. Sanders explains the concept of "covenantal nomism" as follows:

Briefly put, covenantal nomism is the view that one's place in God's plan is established on the basis of the covenant and that the covenant requires as the proper response of man his obedience to its commandments, while providing means of atonement for transgression.³⁹

³⁸ E.P. Sanders, *Paul and Palestinian Judaism* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1977).

³⁹ Sanders, *Paul and Palestinian Judaism*, 75.

Essentially, Sanders suggests that Judaism of Paul's day understood *grace* to be the starting point for *entry* into the covenant and the *law* the basis for *maintenance* in the covenant.⁴⁰

In a later work, *Paul, the Law and the Jewish People*, Sanders suggests that Paul, in his epistle to the Galatians, was not dealing with the matter of "how many good deeds an individual must present before God to be declared righteous at the judgment"⁴¹ but, rather, how Gentiles acquired entry into membership of the Jewish people. In other words, it was the matter of Gentile entry into the Jewish people, not the matter of righteous standing, that was at stake. With respect to the Jewish believers in Christ, Sanders posits that Paul objected to the insistence on circumcision and acceptance of the law for membership, holding "faith" to be the only requirement for entry:

Paul holds that faith is the sole membership requirement; his opponents would require also circumcision and acceptance of the Mosaic law...it is not doing the law which, in Paul's view, is wrong. Circumcision is, from one perspective, a matter of indifference (Gal. 6:15). It is completely wrong, however, when it is made an essential requirement for membership.⁴²

⁴⁰ While there is general acknowledgement of Sanders substantial contribution in challenging traditional characterizations of Second Temple Period Judaism in New Testament scholarship, Sanders own characterization of Second Temple Period Judaism has received critique in recent years. An attempt has been made, for example, to demonstrate that Judaism did, indeed, have a notable focus on merit. See, for example, David A. Carson, Mark A. Seifrid and Peter T. O'Brien, eds. *Justification and Variegated Nomism* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2001).

⁴¹ Sanders, *Paul the Law and the Jewish People*, 20.

⁴² Sanders, *Paul the Law and the Jewish People*, 20.

As may be noted, in speaking about Jewish believers, Sanders states here that Paul viewed circumcision a matter of “indifference.”

On the other hand, however, Sanders understands Paul to have flatly rejected circumcision for his Gentile converts.⁴³ In doing so, that is, in rejecting circumcision for the Gentile and deeming it optional for the Jew, Paul, according to Sanders, reduced the “whole law.” This move, in Sanders view, represented a departure from the understanding of Judaism of the time regarding the binding nature of these commandments. According to Sanders, Paul simply insists, in Rom 8:4, that the requirement of the law may be kept “in the Spirit.”⁴⁴

Although, in a certain respect, this reading of Paul may seem to resonate with the view of Schreiner and Thielman, Sanders, unlike Shreiner and Thielman, does not see Paul as appealing to the “arrival of the messianic age.”⁴⁵ In speculating as to why circumcision along with the Sabbath and food laws were “deleted” by Paul, Sanders notes that they had one factor in common: they all served as ways of maintaining “social distinction” between Jews and “other races of the Graeco-Roman world.”⁴⁶ Sanders though hesitant and not completely explicit, speculates that this may serve as an unconscious factor behind Paul’s dismissal of these particular commandments. He offers the following:

I do not wish to propose that Paul consciously deleted from the law which Christians are to keep the elements which were the most offensive to pagan society purely on practical grounds, so that pagans would find it relatively easy to convert. We should recall, rather, two of his principal convictions: all

⁴³ Sanders, *Paul the Law and the Jewish People*, 102: “‘days’ and food laws are explicitly held to be optional.” See also *Paul and Palestinian Judaism*, 448-489.

⁴⁴ Sanders, *Paul the Law and the Jewish People*, 103.

⁴⁵ Sanders, *Paul the Law and the Jewish People*, 102.

⁴⁶ Sanders, *Paul the Law and the Jewish People*, 102.

are to be saved on the same basis; he was called to be the apostle to the Gentiles. Putting these convictions into practice understandably resulted in deleting circumcision, Sabbath, and food laws from “the whole law” or “the commandments of God.” Yet we must also bear in mind that he gave no theoretical basis for the de facto reduction of the law. We can say that he meant in fact a reduced law when he said that the law was fulfilled in the requirement to love the neighbor only because we can observe the ways in which he reduced it, not because he himself admits that he reduced it.”⁴⁷

Sanders seems to imply here that Paul “deleted” from the law certain commandments, such as circumcision, which drew particular criticism and ridicule from pagan authors (and, as such, posed difficulty in terms of observance for the Gentiles), without fully recognizing or really acknowledging, however, that he had done so.⁴⁸ Sanders thus, together with Dunn and Wright, sees the dissolution of the commandment regarding physical circumcision as a way, in particular, of opening up membership access for Gentiles. Sanders, however, highlights pagan ridicule as the problematic matter; Dunn, meanwhile, as previously discussed, points to the idea of Jewish “boasting.”

Alan Segal, meanwhile, presents another view. He offers that Paul considered circumcision unnecessary for Gentiles and *adiaphora* for Jews, noting, however, that if Paul had had a son, he might have circumcised him in order to claim for him “his rightful place in the ethnic community of Jews.”⁴⁹

⁴⁷ Sanders, *Paul the Law and the Jewish People*, 102-3.

⁴⁸ Sanders, *Paul the Law and the Jewish People*, 102.

⁴⁹ Alan Segal, *Paul the Convert* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990), 222.

3.4 One People (Gentiles as the Returned Exiles of Israel) – Two Laws – With Continued Expectation of Circumcision for the Jew but not the Gentile

Yet another approach is taken by Jason Staples. In an article entitled, “What Do the Gentiles Have to Do with ‘All Israel’? A Fresh Look at Romans 11:25-27,”⁵⁰ Staples argues that Paul, in Rom 11, actually understands the Gentiles to be returning exiles of Israel.⁵¹ In making this case, Staples notes that, in mentioning the “fullness of the Gentiles,” Paul alludes to Gen 48:19:

we are now prepared to return to Paul’s conclusion in 11:25–27, where he explains that Israel will be saved through the ingathering of “the fullness of the Gentiles.” Despite the terseness of Paul’s language, the passage becomes quite clear once the phrase τὸ πλήρωμα τῶν ἐθνῶν is recognized as an allusion to Gen 48:19, where Jacob blesses Joseph’s sons, explaining that he is placing his right hand on the younger Ephraim’s head because “[Manasseh] will also become a people and he will also be great. However, his younger brother [Ephraim] will be greater than he, and his seed will become the fullness of the nations.”⁵²

⁵⁰ Jason Staples, “What Do the Gentiles Have to Do with ‘All Israel’? A Fresh Look at Romans 11:25-27” *JBL* 130 (2011):371-90.

⁵¹ David Starling, meanwhile, notes Paul’s explicit quotation of verses such as Isa 54:1 (in Gal 4:27) and Hos 1:10 and 2:23 (in Rom 9:25-26). These particular biblical verses, Starling suggests, would have, at the time, been understood to refer to the notion of the return of the exiles of Israel. Starling, however, unlike Staples does not view Paul as considering the Gentiles to actually be the exiles of Israel. He suggests, rather, that Paul highlights the concept of the return as a way of pointing, through use of analogy, to the inclusion of the Gentiles. While focusing on the notion of the exiles, Starling shares the same position as those who understand Paul to be addressing two categories of people (Jews and the Gentiles) subject to the same law with physical circumcision as no longer applicable to either group. See David I. Starling, *Not My People: Gentiles as Exiles in Pauline Hermeneutics* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2012).

⁵² Staples, “What Do the Gentiles Have to Do with ‘All Israel’?,” 386.

As Staples indicates, Paul's use of πλήρωμα τῶν ἐθνῶν presents a much closer parallel to the MT than does the LXX.⁵³ This reading opens up the possibility that Paul actually understands the Gentile members of his audience to be descendants of the exiled northern tribes.

In light of this, against the view of Nanos and others, Staples understands Paul to be suggesting that the Gentiles are saved not *qua* Gentiles but rather *qua* Israelites:

For Paul, Gentile converts are not saved “as Gentiles” but actually become equal members of Israel alongside their law-observant Jewish brothers. It is this assertion that was so unbearable for Paul's opponents. Gentiles saved as Gentiles are no concern; Gentiles as Israel are a shocking affront and a grave threat to traditional Israelite identity. The debate is therefore fundamentally over status—specifically the status and identity of the people of Israel.⁵⁴

Staples, however, understands Paul to extend the election to the Gentiles *without* the requirement of circumcision:

It is precisely at this point that Paul is simultaneously most continuous and discontinuous with traditional Judaism. He continues to preach God's special election of Israel, the lasting value of Israel's covenant, and the restoration and ultimate salvation of Israel; but he extends this election to Gentiles

⁵³ Staples, “What Do the Gentiles Have to Do with ‘All Israel’?,” 386.

⁵⁴ Staples, “What Do the Gentiles Have to Do with ‘All Israel’?,” 386.

without any requirement of circumcision, food laws, or any of the other external markers of covenantal membership—an unacceptable move in the eyes of his peers (both Jesus-followers and those who were not).⁵⁵

Though not venturing a particular rationale, Staples, as may be seen, understands Paul to have extended election to the Gentiles without “circumcision, food laws, or any of the other external markers of covenantal membership.”

3.5 Paul was Inconsistent or Changed his Mind over Time

In addition, it may be noted that some do not see consistency in Paul ‘s thinking. Heikki Räisänen, who is perhaps the most notable example of this view, suggests that Paul is simply not the most coherent thinker.⁵⁶ Yet others highlight the notion that Paul changed his mind over time. Thus, for example, Hans Hübner⁵⁷ and Udo Schnelle⁵⁸ each suggest, though based on different reasoning, that Paul had a negative view of the law when he wrote Galatians but a more positive perspective of the law by the time he wrote Romans.

⁵⁵ Staples, “What Do the Gentiles Have to Do with ‘All Israel’?,” 383.

⁵⁶ Räisänen Heikki Räisänen, *Paul & the Law* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1986).

⁵⁷ Hans Hübner, *Law in Paul’s Thought* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1984).

⁵⁸ Udo Schnelle, *The Apostle Paul* (trans. Eugene Boring; Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003) and *Wandlungen in paulinischen Denken* (Stuttgart: Verlag Katholisches Bibelwerk GmbH, 1989), 71-6. For another perspective on change in Paul’s thought see Gerd Lüdemann, *Paulus und das Judentum* (München: Kaiser Verlag, 1983), 42.

3.6 Summary of Some of the Major Lines of Scholarly Argument

As reviewed here, there are several ways in which Paul is understood in terms of his position on the matter of circumcision and the Gentiles. Some suggest that Paul considered circumcision to have been applicable for a time but abolished with the fulfillment of the law in Christ (Schreiner, Thielman, Dunn). Other scholars suggest that Paul understood circumcision to have been intended or to have on-going application only for the Jew and not for the Gentile (Gaston, Gager, Nanos, Fredriksen, Stowers) or as optional for the Jew but not applicable to the Gentile (Sanders, Segal). Among those who espouse the latter two views it should be noted that with the exception of Sanders (who understands Paul as having been strictly opposed to the circumcision of Gentiles), the view is that circumcision is not intended for the Gentile *qua* Gentile. In other words, it is technically possible for Gentile to become circumcised but this would mean that they would become Jewish and thereby forfeit their Gentile status. Meanwhile, Staples suggests that Paul understood the Gentiles to be exiled members of Israel and thus saved *qua* Israel, however, without the requirement of circumcision or other covenantal markers.

4. Approach and Considerations

The approach that will be taken here is basically a socio-historical one - that is to say, one that seeks to understand Paul from the perspective of his own time period and social matrix. A focus on three factors will be considered key in the evaluation of the apostle's writings: 1) knowledge of the biblical texts concerning circumcision, including differences found in the textual tradition 2) awareness of the range of questions and issues concerning circumcision (when should it be

performed, how should it be performed, etc...) together with the corresponding Jewish positions on those issues 3) attitudes toward circumcision that may have been found among the members of Paul's audiences and the respective wider communities of which they were a part.

4.1 The Biblical Texts

While it may seem obvious, in reading Paul, it is absolutely critical to consult the biblical text. Paul, in Gal 1:15 claims to have been "advanced" in Judaism. Aside from appeal to his own experience, he continuously engages the biblical text – often alluding to it or quoting it explicitly, citing it as an authority for his positions. Paul's peers and exegetical opponents would have been intimately familiar with the biblical text as well.

Prior to approaching Paul and other Jewish readings on the topic of circumcision then, it is essential to have at hand, knowledge of the main biblical passages concerning circumcision. Although we may not have Paul's Bible or Bibles, versions remain that may closely approximate what Paul would have used. It must be noted, however, that aside from the basic language difference, there are, at points, critical textual variations between the Hebrew MT and Greek LXX texts. Although the MT seems, at times, to be used as the default consideration, Paul's own use of scripture, though sometimes matching the MT, more closely resembles the LXX. It is thus crucial, at the very least, to consult both the MT and LXX traditions.

4.2 A Spectrum of Questions, a Spectrum of Jewish Interpretations of the Biblical Text and Views Pertaining to Circumcision

This current study takes seriously the observation made as well by others that Paul, in his epistles, was not writing systematic theology. This is not to say that there was no coherence at all to his views but rather that he may have been responding more organically to issues particular but also overlapping issues and questions which arose in specific communities. Often, of course, we have Paul's response but not the initial situation or query which elicited it. To some extent, details of particular situations may be beyond the pale of historical recovery. Examination, however, of the biblical text together with sources contemporary to Paul, both Jewish and Greco-Roman, may aid in shedding light on the possible theological, social and historical issues involved.

Indeed, a case may be made that, during Paul's time, there existed a spectrum of questions regarding circumcision along with a spectrum of Jewish responses to those questions each with various weight accorded to each. Baptism, may provide a helpful analogy. In the ritual performance of baptism, multiple questions must be addressed. At what point, for example, should an individual be baptized - at birth or as an adult? If in adulthood, should an individual be baptized immediately after accepting Christ or only following a certain period of religious instruction? Also, how should a person be baptized – by sprinkling, infusion (pouring) or full immersion in water? Importantly, what exactly does the rite signify? Is it necessary to undergo baptism in order to become “born again”? To be cleansed from sins? To be saved? What about becoming a member of the community or body of Christ? Is baptism a prerequisite for the taking of communion bread? For each one of these

issues, there are a variety of responses among various Christian groups. Moreover, for some groups, baptism is not a doctrinal subject of central import. For others, however, it is of defining significance. Indeed, an entire Christian denomination is even named after the issue – the Baptists.

Though different issues are, of course, raised with regard to circumcision than with baptism, a case may be made that a variety of questions would have likewise pertained. These, it may be argued, would have included the following: Was, for example, circumcision considered necessary in order to become a Jew? What did it mean if an adult male was not circumcised on the eighth day after birth? What, moreover, did circumcision actually signify? Was circumcision required for justification? For righteousness or salvation? For entry into the Abrahamic covenant and membership in the Jewish community? For table fellowship? How was the rite physically performed?⁵⁹

Although it will not be possible to address each of these questions with the same depth of attention, they will be kept in mind. Particular attention, however, will be paid to the question regarding the necessity of circumcision in “becoming a Jew.” On this question, in terms of scholarship to date, Neil McEleney, through review of both rabbinic and earlier sources, proposes that circumcision, particularly in the diaspora, was not always required for conversion. With this in mind, he suggests that Paul would thus have been within the bounds of Judaism of his time in

⁵⁹ There is, of course, an important relationship between the rite of baptism and that of circumcision. This particular study, however, will focus consideration on the rite of circumcision.

dispensing with the ritual.⁶⁰ John Nolland, however, in a point-by-point refutation, counters McEleney's analysis, concluding (albeit without comment on Paul), that the notion of an "uncircumcised proselyte" did not exist in Judaism.⁶¹

McEleney and Nolland both present sustained treatments of the question of whether or not whether or not circumcision was required for conversion. Outside of this well-cited debate, the question of the role of circumcision in conversion has been tackled perhaps most prominently in works dealing, not specifically with Paul, but rather with the notions of Jewish identity, Jewish-Gentile relations and Jewish proselytism. Martin Goodman and Scot McKnight, for example, in their respective treatments of Jewish missionary activity in antiquity, comment on the requirement of circumcision for the proselyte. Goodman, referencing McEleney's consideration of the rabbinic dispensation of circumcision in the case of hemophiliacs suggests that, "an uncircumcised Jew was not a logical impossibility."⁶² With consideration of a few sources however (together with citation of Nolland's arguments), Goodman concludes that evidence for uncircumcised proselytes "is minimal and should be discounted."⁶³ McKnight expresses caution in averring ubiquitous requirement of the rite but offers that, most often and in most places, circumcision was "*the act* that permitted the would-be convert to cross the boundary and enter the community."⁶⁴

⁶⁰ Neil J. McEleney, "Conversion, Circumcision and the Law," *NTS* 20 (1974): 319-41. See also discussion by J.Z. Smith in *Imagining Religion: From Babylon to Jonestown* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1982), 8-14.

⁶¹ John Nolland, "Uncircumcised Proselytes?" *JSJ* 12 (1981): 173-94.

⁶² Citing *b. Pes* 9a. See Martin Goodman, *Mission and Conversion: Proselytizing in the Religious History of the Roman Empire* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994), 67.

⁶³ Goodman, *Mission*, 81.

⁶⁴ "It seems quite probable to me that circumcision was seen as an act whereby the male convert demonstrated his zeal for the law and his willingness to join

Shaye Cohen, meanwhile, in his significant work on notions of Jewish identity, also considers relevant sources regarding circumcision. Cohen aptly remarks on the complexity of Jewish identity: “Jewishness was a subjective identity constructed by the individual him/herself, other Jews, other gentiles, and the state.”⁶⁵ He also notes that Philo of Alexandria seems to have considered it possible to acquire “membership in the Israelite polity” prior to becoming physically circumcised.⁶⁶ He concludes, nevertheless, that: “as far as is known no Jewish community in antiquity (including Philo’s) accepted as members male proselytes who were not circumcised.”⁶⁷ In other words, Cohen understands Philo to be expressing a particular theological perspective that lacked any practical social consequence in terms of membership in actual Jewish communities.⁶⁸

Segal, on the other hand, takes note of Philo’s reference to those who allegorized circumcision and dismissed the rite as a physical requirement. Although this reference by Philo to the “allegorizers” is recognized, it is often treated as having been of marginal significance. Segal, however, assumes the view had

Judaism without reservation. I hesitate to conclude that circumcision was a requirement throughout Second Temple Judaism, because the evidence is not completely unambiguous and there may well have been some diversity on the matter. Circumcision was probably required for male converts most of the time and in most local expressions of Judaism. It was *the* ritual that separated the Jew from the Gentile (at least in Jewish perception), and therefore it would have been *the act* that permitted the would-be convert to cross the boundary and enter the community.” Scot McKnight, *A Light Among the Gentiles: Jewish Missionary Activity in the Second Temple Period* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991), 82.

⁶⁵ Shaye D. Cohen, *The Beginnings of Jewishness: Boundaries, Varieties, Uncertainties* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), 3.

⁶⁶ Cohen, *Beginnings*, 157.

⁶⁷ Cohen, *Beginnings*, 158.

⁶⁸ Cohen, *Beginnings*, 158. Cohen states, “Theological conversion was not social conversion.” See Cohen, *Beginnings*, 152.

practical implications in Paul's day.⁶⁹ Indeed, he understands Paul to have had a position regarding physical circumcision that actually resembled that of Philo's "allegorizers."

Segal's position notwithstanding it is a common implicit working assumption in scholarship dealing with Paul that circumcision, during the first century CE, was considered necessary in order to "become a Jew." Even in studies that explicitly question the role of circumcision in conversion, the conclusion reached is that circumcision was required to become a Jew. Thus, for example, Terence Donaldson, in his work on Paul, offers substantive consideration of the sources regarding conversion. He ultimately suggests, however, that the notion of an uncircumcised proselyte is "dubious."⁷⁰

Other topics, meanwhile, while having begun to receive more attention of late have, historically, received little or no attention at all, particularly in the realm of Pauline studies. The question of how physical circumcision was defined in the first century, for example, seems largely unexplored. Although the relevance of the question might not be immediately apparent, it may be argued that without consideration of the question, it is not possible to reflect at all on how the matter may or may not have related to Paul's discourse on the subject. Again, since Paul does not detail all the issues at stake and since we are entering, as it were, into one side of a dialogue midstream, it would seem helpful, prior to adducing any conclusions (regarding what the apostle might or might not have been discussing),

⁶⁹ Segal, *Paul the Covert*, 203.

⁷⁰ Donaldson, *Remapping the Apostle's Convictional World* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1997), 58.

to have more information on the practice of circumcision in the first century than less.

4.3 A Spectrum of Pauline Audiences, a Spectrum of Gentile Attitudes toward Circumcision

Jewish views of course, are not the only ones that would have been of import. Another factor, of course, that is important to keep in mind, is the nature of Paul's audiences. Though it might seem obvious, the make-up of the community in Galatia, no matter where in Anatolia it may ultimately have been located, for example, was not the same as that in Rome. Some of those in the groups he addressed may have already been circumcised, while others might not have been. Some may have been free to undergo the rite while others, namely slaves, might not have been. Some, such as the Roman centurion Cornelius (mentioned in Acts 10), may have been quite familiar with Jewish belief and practice. Others, however, such as the worshippers of Zeus described in Acts 14, might have had less understanding and exposure to Jewish traditions and ideas. There would have been, moreover, a range of attitudes toward circumcision. Depending on cultural sensitivities, some may have been more amenable to the rite while others may have been more averse to it.

In order to properly consider Paul's treatment of the topic of circumcision in his various epistles then, it would seem worthwhile to consider the issues that might have been faced by those in his audiences. While certain concerns (such as that for the physical pain entailed in circumcision) may have transcended locale, others may have been shaped by more particular regional attitudes. Whether a Gentile man was more or less willing to undergo circumcision would have been

informed to some degree by the particular social attitudes in which he was raised and/or surrounded. Such attitudes, of course, would have varied among groups of people in different nations.

As has been well discussed by others, for example, Jewish as well as non-Jewish Greek and Latin sources indicate that the practice of circumcision was ridiculed and held in disdain among Greeks and Romans. Such attitudes would have had implications for those who were circumcised or considering circumcision, particularly, for example, in Athens or Rome.

On the other hand, Jews were certainly not alone in the practice of circumcision. Sources indicate that Egyptians, Arabs and other groups practiced circumcision as well. Different attitudes would, of course, have prevailed in these communities.

Meanwhile, the degree of familiarity with or acceptance of other forms of ritual cutting may also have been relevant. Susan Elliott, for example, in her work on Galatians, highlights the practice among the Galli of ritual castration.⁷¹ Those who were accepting of or on some level more used to such practice may have been more willing to take up circumcision.

⁷¹ Susan Elliott, *Cutting Too Close for Comfort: Paul's Letter to the Galatians in its Anatolian Cultic Context* (London: T&T Clark, 2003).

5. Structure

The following chapter, chapter 2, will be devoted to the review of three key issues. The first section will consider possible concerns in the financial, social and physical arenas that might have been faced by men contemplating circumcision. While social attitudes toward circumcision in the Greco-Roman world have been well examined, the topic is worth review, particularly in preface to reading Paul in Romans. Less considered perhaps are the financial and physical aspects or consequence of the rite. Some observations will thus be offered on those fronts as well.

The second task of chapter 2 will be to ascertain whether or not circumcision was actually considered necessary in order to become a Jew. Although, as discussed, this topic has received fairly generous prior attention there is, arguably, room for further examination. Moreover, while rabbinic sources may be pertinent to the discussion, focus will be placed here on relevant early texts and sources contemporary with or produced close to the time of Paul.

Finally, since Paul makes particular appeal to the figure of Abraham in Romans with regard to the topic of circumcision, consideration will be given to the way in which Philo of Alexandria, an elder contemporary of Paul, portrays Abraham as an exemplar both of and for the proselyte.

Having covered these grounds, chapter 3 will then be devoted to a close reading of Romans 1-4 in light of the findings of chapter 2. Through this reading, the possibility that Paul did not entirely dismiss the physical rite of circumcision for Gentile men will be ventured. The views of the majority of the scholars discussed in

this present chapter will then be engaged. In the course of this engagement, evidence for the practice of circumcision among Gentile nations will be highlighted.

With the arguments concerning Romans in mind, chapter 4 will then deal with Paul's seeming dismissal of the rite of circumcision as found in Galatians, Philippians and 1 Corinthians. The first section of chapter 4 will deal specifically with Paul's strenuous objections to the rite as found in Galatians. At the outset of the section, possible differences in attitude between those in Galatia and those in Rome toward the practice of circumcision will be suggested. Discussion will then move to Paul's approach to the topic of circumcision within the epistle itself. Paul's reference in Philippians to circumcision seemingly as "mutilation" will also be briefly treated. Consideration will then be given to the question of coherency and the possibility of development in Paul's thought over time.

In the latter section of chapter 4, a possible rationale for Paul's dismissive attitude toward circumcision in 1 Corinthians will be addressed through particular attention to the situation of slaves and freedmen as well as the practice of both epispasm and recircumcision. Finally, in chapter 5, some summary reflections and thoughts regarding possibilities for further areas of research will be offered.⁷²

⁷² Texts used herein are as follows: NT - Nestle-Aland 27th ed., MT – Biblica Hebraica Stuttgartensia, LXX – Rahlfs ed. Translations are mine except where otherwise noted.

Chapter 2

Before Reading Paul on Circumcision

1. Introduction

As mentioned, there are three primary goals for this chapter. The first is to highlight possible concerns in the financial, social and physical realms of those who may have been contemplating circumcision. The second is to consider whether or not circumcision, during Paul's era, was always required in order to become a Jew. The third and final goal of the chapter is to examine Philo of Alexandria's portrayal of Abraham as an exemplar of and for the proselyte. It is hoped that exploration of these three subjects will help to illuminate Paul's approach to the topic of circumcision.

2. Concerns of the Uncircumcised Regarding Circumcision

As discussed in the previous chapter, certain analogies may be made between baptism and circumcision. On the other hand, of course, there are notable differences between the two rites. The book of Acts, for example, contains several scenes of individuals or groups of people who, upon hearing the message preached by Jesus' followers, become immediately immersed in water.¹ In none of these instances is there any indication of hesitation or resistance on the part of those baptized. Acts 8:36, for example, suggests that a eunuch of Queen Candace of Ethiopia, after having listened to an explanation of the book of Isaiah, responds

¹ See Acts 8:12; 8:36; 9:18; 10:47; 16:15; 18:8; 19:5, and 22:16.

immediately by initiating his own baptism. Immersion or water baptism continues, of course, to be a central rite in the Christian tradition.

The rite of baptism, however, has no ostensible lasting effects on the physical body. Circumcision, meanwhile, affects a permanent corporal change. The practice of circumcision in antiquity, moreover, was subject to and had very specific immediate and long-term ramifications in a variety of earthly spheres – the financial, legal and possibly political arenas and certainly the social and physical realms. It is not surprising then, that the demand to be circumcised may not have been met with the same type of immediate response as baptism. Rather, it seems, in certain instances at least, to have engendered anxiety and heated debate.

While some of the concerns of uncircumcised men in Paul's time might seem obvious, they may not always be adequately considered. Other factors, meanwhile, might be less apparent. The purpose of the present section then is to explore some of the reasons why men in general and, perhaps in particular, those residing in the very capital of the empire, the city of Rome, may have been *reluctant* to become circumcised.

2.1 Financial Concerns

One concern for those contemplating circumcision may have been for the financial costs involved. Extant sources seem to indicate that physicians performed the rite.² Presumably, some sort of fee for the procedure would have been involved. Loss of income or wages due to recovery time may have been another factor to consider. In some cases, individuals may have sought official admittance to a local synagogue. If so, membership fees would, most likely, have been collected. It is possible too that legal papers declaring official Jewish status may have been necessary. Presumably, as with other Jews, proselytes would have been expected to contribute the yearly ½ shekel to the Temple in Jerusalem. Whether the cumulative costs were considered nominal or substantial would, of course, have depended upon the particular financial circumstances of the individual involved

² Josephus mentions that when King Izates of Adiabene was circumcised, he called for a physician. Likewise, the *T. Mos.* 1:930-1 refers to physicians. The later legislation of Antoninus specifically banned physicians from performing circumcision. It is, of course, possible that certain designated medical or religious specialists (such as a *mohe*) existed. Circumcisions, otherwise, would have been performed by one more akin to a 'general practitioner.' See Ralph Jackson and Susan La Niece, "A Set of Roman Medical Instruments from Italy" *Britannia* 17 (1986), 166-167.

2.2 Social Concerns

Both Philo and the Jewish historian, Josephus, note respectively that circumcision was a source of ridicule and critique among others. Philo, for example, in his preface to his treatise, *De specialibus legibus* states the following:

I will begin with that which is an object of ridicule among many people. Now the practices which is thus ridiculed, namely the circumcision of the genital organs, is very zealously observed by many other nations, particularly the Egyptians, a race regarded as pre-eminent for its populousness, its antiquity and its attachment to philosophy. And therefore, it would be well for the detractors to desist from childish mockery and to inquire in a wiser and more serious spirit into the causes to which the persistence of this custom is due, instead of dismissing the matter prematurely and impugning the good sense of great nations. (Colson)

As may be seen, Philo suggests that circumcision was the subject of “childish mockery” by “detractors” and was an “object of ridicule among many people.” In order, therefore, to enhance a sense of respect for circumcision and the “good sense” of the Jewish nation, Philo points out that others also practiced the rite. He specifically mentions the Egyptians since they were respected for their “populousness,” “antiquity” and “attachment to philosophy.” Meanwhile, Josephus, in *C. Ap.* 1.143-4 suggests that, Apion, an uncircumcised Egyptian who derided the Jewish practice of circumcision, received a just punishment for maligning his own country’s laws together along with that of others since he died of a condition that required a circumcision to be performed though to no avail.

In the next section, passages by Greek and Latin authors that deal with circumcision will be discussed. In certain instances, there is dispute as to whether or not a given text actually refers to the rite. As will be seen, however, even among the

few sources considered, there does seem to be witness for the claims made by both Philo and Josephus that the practice of circumcision was mocked or derided.

2.2.1 Greek Sources

Early sources indicate that circumcision was considered unattractive and foreign to the Greeks. Herodotus, the ancient Greek historian from Halicarnassus, for example, mentions the following:

Other people, unless they have been influenced by the Egyptians, leave their genitals in their natural state, but the Egyptians practice circumcision...Because they are exceedingly religious, more so than any other people in the world, they have the following customs. Everyone, without any exceptions, scrubs clean the bronze cup he uses for drinking every day. The linen cloaks they wear are always freshly washed; this is something they are very particular about. Their concern for cleanliness also explains why they practice circumcision, since they value cleanliness more than comeliness. (*Hist.* 2.36-37, Waterfield)³

As may be seen, Herodotus understands the Egyptian practice of circumcision to be based on a concern for “cleanliness” that is rooted in exceeding religiosity. Herodotus, himself however, while accepting circumcision as a promoting

³ This passage seems, at times, overlooked, perhaps because it is not included in *GLAJJ* (due to its lack of reference to Jews or “Palestinian Syrians”).

cleanliness, considers it to compromise “comeliness” or beauty. Significantly, however, he does not go so far as to describe circumcision as a form of mutilation.⁴

On the literary front, the Athenian playwright, Aristophanes, offers comedic scenes that likewise present circumcision as a disfigurement of the body. In *Plut.* 265, for example, the character Cairo remarks:

My friends, he has brought with him a disgusting old fellow, all bent and wrinkled, with the most pitiful appearance, bald and toothless; upon my word, I even believe he is circumcised like some vile barbarian. (*Plut.* 265, Hall and Geldart)

Circumcision is listed here as the pinnacle of various bodily defects in appearance. It is also considered a foreign or “barbarian” practice. Other references in Aristophanes seem to likewise associate circumcision with “barbarian” nations, specifically with the Phoenicians, Egyptians and Thracians.⁵

Herodotus, in *Hist.* 2.104, even suggests that those who came into contact with the Greeks discontinued the practice of circumcision. As will be noted in conjunction with the next source, while the historian specifically mentions the

⁴ See also Fredrick Hodges, “The Ideal Prepuce in Ancient Greece and Rome: Male Genital Aesthetics and Their Relation to *Lipodermos*, Circumcision, Foreskin Restoration, and the *Kynodesmê*,” *Bulletin of the History of Medicine* 75 (2001): 385 and Pierre Cordier, “Les Romains et la Circoncision,” *Revue des Études juives* 160 (2001), 337-55.

⁵ See also *Av.* 505-506 (in reference to the Phoenicians and Egyptians) and *Ach.* 135 (in reference to the Thracians). Another possible reference may be found in *Ach.* 591.

Phoenicians as an example of this, sources indicate that, in certain cases, this was true of the Jews as well.

Writing close to a century prior to Paul, Diodorus of Sicily, in his *Bibliotheca historica*, makes note of the Jewish practice of circumcision. Whereas Herodotus presumes that the Jews had learned circumcision from the Egyptians, Diodorus suggests (in 1.28:1-3 and 1.55:5) that the Jews were colonists who had been sent out of Egypt and thus practiced circumcision due to their Egyptian origin. In 34-35.1:1-5, he claims more specifically, however, that the Jews were lepers who had been cast out of Egypt.

In this same passage, the historian recounts the actions of Antiochus Epiphanes against the Jews, explaining that Antiochus' advisers had counseled the king to eradicate the "misanthropic and lawless customs" ordained by Moses. Certain aspects of Diodorus' account of Antiochus' harsh treatment of the Jews, including the king's desecration of the Temple with the blood and body of a pig, are actually corroborated by Jewish sources.

According to the latter, Jewish society, at this time, was divided. Some, who wished to participate, for example, in the key cultural, educational and social institution of the Greek gymnasium sought to hide or reverse their circumcision.⁶ Antiochus, moreover, forbade circumcision on pain of death and, as a result, some

⁶ Most notably perhaps, according to the accounts found in 1 Macc 1:11-15 and Jos A.J. 12.241, certain Jews in Jerusalem during the second century BCE underwent epispasm in order to participate in the gymnasium. Since not merely bathing but exercise as well was in the nude, the aim would have been to appear uncircumcised and thereby conform to Greek bodily standards. The example serves to illustrate that circumcision had implications not only for how one might be perceived in terms of bodily beauty but also in terms of access to significant educational and cultural institutions.

ceased to practice circumcision out of fear. Those who resisted the ban, however, were tortured and killed. These actions, of course, ultimately precipitated the Maccabean Wars.⁷ Although Diodorus himself does not specifically mention circumcision, it is certainly possible that he would have understood the rite to be an example of the “misanthropic and lawless customs” of the Jews that Antiochus sought to “tear down.”

Finally, a contemporary of Paul, Strabo of Amaseia (d. 20’s 1st CE) likewise suggests (in the *Geogr.* 17.2.5) that the Jews practiced circumcision due to their Egyptian origin. In an earlier passage, however (*Geogr.* 16.2.36-37) he posits that while Moses and his immediate successors were good leaders, they were eventually succeeded by “superstitious men” and then by “tyrannical people.” Moreover, according to Strabo, the practice of circumcision arose from “superstition.” He

⁷ In terms of Jewish sources, 1 Macc 1:41 relates that Antiochus Epiphanes had directed all of his subjects to abandon their unique laws in an attempt to make “one people” (λαὸν ἓνα)⁷ of all the members of his kingdom. According to the continuing account, whereas other nations and certain Jews complied with the king’s decree, some Jews attempted to continue their ancestral rites and customs (such as observance of the Sabbath, dietary laws and the circumcision of their sons) with disastrous consequence.

1 Macc 1:41-61, 2 Macc 6:3-10, 4 Macc. 4.23-25 and Josephus in *A.J.* 12.254-256 all relate that Antiochus Epiphanes IV banned the practice of circumcision upon pain of death. These passages claim that children who had been circumcised in contravention of the ban were killed. The Maccabean texts further suggest that the mothers were forced to carry the bodies of their dead children around their necks and were then likewise killed (2 Macc and 4 Macc. add that the mothers were cast down headlong from a precipice or city wall). Josephus, meanwhile, states that the fathers were crucified and made to watch as their wives and sons were strangled. According to his account, the infant sons were then dangled from the necks of their crucified fathers. Forced abrogation of these practices, of course, ultimately precipitated the Maccabean revolt. In the texts of 1 and 2 Macc, 4 Macc. and Josephus, circumcision emerges, along with other laws, as an emblem in the clash of respective notions of piety and cultural ideals (Greek vs. Jewish) and as a rite, on the Jewish side, worthy of defense and maintenance, even in the face of torturous death.

seems to thus imply that circumcision was initially introduced to the Jews and subsequently maintained through the leadership of tyrannical and superstitious men.

Also, according to Josephus in *A.J.* 13.319, Strabo, citing Timagenes, mentions that the Jewish Hasmonean king, Aristobulus I, brought over the Iturean nation to that of the Jews with the “bond” of circumcision. The translation of Josephus by Ralph Marcus (in the Loeb series) gives the impression that Timagenes and/or perhaps Strabo viewed the king and his actions regarding the Itureans in a favorable light. The text may be read, however, with a more negative valence as an example of the Aristobulus’s exceedingly violent (σφόδρα) nature. Unfortunately, Timagenes’ work is known only through citations from other sources. A negative characterization, however, would be more in keeping with the discussion of the Jewish practice of circumcision found in Strabo as well as Josephus’ own narrative concerning the king.⁸

Interestingly, however, Strabo, along with Diodorus, seems more neutral in the mention of circumcision in connection with the Egyptians and somewhat harsher when speaking of the Jews alone.⁹ To some extent, this might be due to the fact, as previously noted, that the Egyptians were respected for their antiquity. It is also perhaps of note that Strabo presents circumcision in a somewhat harsher light than Herodotus and Aristophanes, describing circumcision as misanthropic and

⁸ Prior to citing Strabo’s account, Josephus, albeit mentioning the king’s remorse, chronicles Aristobulus’ treacherous murder of his own brother.

⁹ See also Feldman, *Jews and Gentile*, 154.

superstitious practice rather than a marring of bodily beauty (although he may assume the latter as well).

The notion that circumcision was not accepted among the Greeks is corroborated by other sources. Paul himself, for example, in Gal 2.3 implies that his companion, Titus, “being a Greek,” was uncircumcised. Similarly, according to Acts 16:3, certain Jews assumed that Timothy, though the son of a Jewish woman, must have been uncircumcised “because they all knew his father was a Greek.”¹⁰ In other words, circumcision was understood to be so antithetical to Greek culture that someone known to be Greek was simply assumed to be uncircumcised.

Aside from textual sources, productions in the visual arts also provide information regarding attitudes toward circumcision. Given the biblical injunction against graven images and Jewish concerns regarding the depiction of the body, representations on the Jewish side, particularly for the first century, are wanting. On the Greek and Roman side, of course, the situation is quite different. Depictions of the human figure both of the self and other abound. Examining such visual imagery, of course, has its own particular set of challenges. It is not always clear, for example, who is being represented, by whom or why. Scholars, however, have determined that the circumcised body was not considered a physical ideal among the Greeks.

As noted, for example, by Peter Schäfer,¹¹ Kenneth Dover observes that in comparing circumcised figures on Greek vases to figures classically considered

¹⁰ See also *A.J.* 12:241.

¹¹ See Peter Schäfer, *Judeophobia* (Cambridge: Harvard University, 1997), 105.

handsome (such as Hercules), circumcision may be characterized as unattractive.¹² This visual representation of circumcision as uncomely is consistent with the comments found in the writings of Herodotus as well as the theatrical work of Aristophanes. Although far pre-dating Paul, it should be noted that the works of Aristophanes as well as Herodotus continued to be read in Paul's time.¹³ Likewise, older artistic productions were still extant in Paul's day. While a study of visual evidence particular to the first century CE would certainly be beneficial, it is reasonable to assume the uncircumcised body continued to be the Greek ideal.

2.2.2 Latin Sources

Material on the Latin side shares sentiment similar to that found in the Greek sources regarding circumcision. As noted by Augustine (*Civ.* 6.11), for example, Seneca, the famous philosopher and contemporary of Paul, referred to the Jews as an "accursed race." He expresses outrage that the customs of the Jews had spread throughout the world and that the "vanquished" had thus "given laws to the victors." Since it is one of the notable "customs" of the Jews, it is reasonable to assume that circumcision would have been one of the specific customs to which Seneca objected.

The Roman historian, Tacitus, writing in the early second century CE expresses a

¹² Kenneth J. Dover, *Greek Homosexuality* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1978), 129-30. Eva C. Keuls, through her own evaluation of the sources, affirms Dover's assessment of attitudes toward circumcision in Greek artistic productions (See Eva Keuls, *The Reign of the Phallus* (New York: Harper & Row: 1985), 68-9). See also Fredrick Hodges, "The Ideal Prepuce," 375-405.

¹³ On the reading of Aristophanes in the first century CE see Ewen Bowie, "The Ups and Downs of Aristophanic Travel," in *Aristophanes in Performance, 421 BC-AD 2007: Peace, Birds, and Frogs* (ed. Edith Hall, Amanda Wrigley; London: Legenda, 2007), 31-51. Josephus cites Herodotus specifically on the topic of circumcision in *C. Ap.* 2.142.

similar view, citing circumcision as a specific example of the “base and abominable” customs of the Jews (*Hist.* 5.1-2).

Textual references to circumcision in Latin are found, however, mainly in the work of the satirists. The following treatment will consider satirists who lived prior to Paul (Gnaeus Naevius and Horace), those contemporary with Paul (Persius and Petronius) as well as the much younger contemporary of Paul, Martial. It may be noted that all of the Latin authors discussed here wrote and resided, or resided at least for some time, in the capital city of Rome.

As will be seen, a variety of terms for circumcision are found in the work of the Latin satirists. These include the following: *curtis* (“docked” or “shortened” (referring to the shortened foreskin) – in Horace), *verpe* (“exposed” – referring to exposure of the glans – in Martial) and *recutitus* (“skinned” – in Martial, Persius and Petronius). The specific meaning of each must be discerned from the context. In some cases, the meaning is contested. Various translators and commentators have understood the term, *recutitus*, for example, differently. Some suggest that it refers to circumcision.¹⁴ Others, however, understand the term to refer, in an opposing sense, to epispasm – that is, the process of drawing the foreskin down in order to make it appear uncircumcised.¹⁵ Given this, both possibilities will be here considered.¹⁶

¹⁴ Cohen, for example, understands *recutitus* to mean “circumcised.” While noting that *cuit* means “skin” he takes the prefix *re* to signify “removed” and thus suggests that the term *recutitus* may be rendered: “with the (fore)skin removed.” See Cohen, *Beginnings*, 40 n.52.

¹⁵ Guillermo Vioque, for example, in his commentary on Martial, mentions the following: “A. Edwards (cf. *Erotica Iudaica* [New York 1967] 135, contra D.S. Barret, LCM 9 [1984] 43) suggested taking *recutitus* not as a reference to

Perhaps the earliest extant reference to circumcision in the Latin sources is found in the title of a work by the 3rd century BCE Latin author, Gnaeus Naevius. This text may indicate an early Latin comedic take on circumcision. A work by the grammarian Priscianus, the *Institutiones Grammaticae*, preserves the title of the play, *Apelles*, along with two lines from the play itself. Since other titles of Naevius' work include the *Testicularia* ("Relating to the Testicles") and *Triphallus* ("Three Phalluses") and since *Apelles*, as *a pelles*, may be translated, "skinless" (that is, "without skin" or "lacking skin"), it has been speculated that the title and the play itself may concern circumcision.¹⁷ If so, this would serve as indication for an early satirical tradition on the rite.

The name *Apelles* is found, moreover, in the later work of the Augustan poet, Horace, as the name for a Jew or, possibly, a proselyte, arguably in continuation of the earlier satirical tradition. In addition, in *Sat.* 1.8, Horace refers to the *curtis Iudaeis* as part of a comical scene (actually, a comedy within a comedy) in which he

circumcision but to their having undergone an operation to eliminate the effects of circumcision and thus conceal the fact that they were Jews; cf. Cels 7.25. For the expression, cf. Sidon. *Carm.* 22.201: *fert recutitorum primordial Iudaeorum*" (Guillermo Galan Vioque, *Martial Book VII: A Commentary* (trans. J.J. Zoltowski; Leiden: Brill, 2002), 218.¹⁵

¹⁶ Shakelton Bailey, in his work on Martial for the Loeb series translates *recutitus* as "skinned" (see *Ep.* 9.57). This seems the best rendering for *recutitus* in English since, as indicated in the OED, "skinned" may be taken to mean: 1. "Endowed with or possessing skin" (as in "a handsome, bronze skinned people") or 2. "Deprived of skin" (as in "a skinned patch on his left shin"). A case may be made, though necessarily elsewhere, that the satirists, having a penchant both for social comment and double entendre (or, more properly, multiple entendre), took full advantage of terms that had varying and even opposing senses.

¹⁷ Against these points, Menachem Stern (*GLAJJ* 3:13-4) raises some concerns. These, however, may be countered. See, for example, Schäfer, *Judeophobia*, 96.

plays the part of a skeptic¹⁸ who does not observe or defer to the observances of the “shortened Jews.”¹⁹

Petronius, a later satirist and contemporary of Paul, also refers to circumcision. Although, as will be discussed further in chapter 3, the matter is not as straightforward as might initially seem, he indicates, in the *Sat.*102.13-14, that circumcision was considered a hallmark of the Jew. Meanwhile, in a scene found earlier in the same work (68.4-8), a slave owner, Habinass describes his slave, Massa (with whom, as is evident from certain details in the text, he is having sexual relations), as a “perfect number” except for “two faults” – he is skinned (*recutitus*) and snores. In contrast then to the treatment of the foreskin in biblical and Jewish sources as a “reproach,”²⁰ circumcision is presented, in the work of Petronius, as a “fault.” Of course, as noted earlier, *recutitus* might be taken to mean that Massa is circumcised, but, alternatively, that he is epispaetic. Although the latter might be regarded as an “improvement,” as will be discussed shortly in relation to the work of Martial, an epispaetic body would still be considered less desirable than a fully intact one.

It should be noted, however, that Massa is not actually called a Jew in the narrative. Rather, his origin and identity are ambiguous. In another work, however, *Fragment 27*, Petronius presents circumcision as a requirement for a “Jew” who worships his “piggish deity.” Since the latter seems to be an epithet of ridicule or scorn, the practice of circumcision is thus presented in a mocking or derisive

¹⁸ Or, alternatively, a defender of proper Roman *religio*.

¹⁹ Such as the observance of the Sabbath or New Moon (*hodie tricensima sabbata*). For further discussion, see *GLAJJ* 1:129.

²⁰ See, for example, Gen 34:14.

fashion. This particular piece will be given further consideration in the next section.

Meanwhile, Persius, another contemporary of Paul, mentions “the Sabbath of the skinned (*recutitus*) Jews” in *Sat.* 5.176-184. Once again, the term *recutitus* may be taken to mean “circumcised” or “epispastic.” Reference to community of circumcised Jews would, of course, be understandable. Is it plausible, however, that an entire community of epispastic Jews existed?

As just discussed, the character Habinass in Petronius’ *Satyricon*, may be understood as having had his slave undergo epispasm for the sake of bodily beauty. The first century CE physician, Celsus, in *De medicina* 7.25.1 comments, in a similar vein, that a circumcised individual could undergo corrective surgery for the sake of *decoris* – that is, for beauty and/or propriety.²¹ As will be discussed, the Latin satirist, Martial, likewise indicates that the covering of the glans was considered a matter of beauty as well as propriety.

Thus if, considering Roman cultural values, circumcised slaves in Roman households were subject to epispasm and, moreover, the Jewish community described by Persius was made up primarily of ex-slaves or freedmen, then a reference to a community of observant yet epispastic Jews would be tenable. In any case, it may be noted that Persius presents the Sabbath of the “skinned” Jews, along with the breaking of an egg and the prescription of a Galli priest for eating garlic (in

²¹ Jodi P. Rubin states “Decorum rather than health is the motive by using *decoris causa* (‘for the sake of appearance’), Celsus implies that an uncovered glans was socially unacceptable in Rome of the early empire, a Rome that had adopted the Greek institution of public nudity in the gymnasium and baths.” See Jody P. Rubin, “Celsus’ Decircumcision Operation: Medical and Historical Implications,” *Urology* 16 (1980): 121-124.

order to ward off evil) as examples of superstitious practice,²² deference to which represents a type of slavery.

Finally, it may be noted that Martial also includes various references to circumcision.²³ In *Epigr.* 11.94, for example, he portrays a certain “exposed” (*verpe*) man born in *Solymis* as a lecherous and pederastic plagiarist. If, as suggested by Shackleton Bailey’s translation in the Loeb series, “Jerusalem” is taken as a reading for *Solymis*, then a reference to a circumcised Jew is certainly possible.²⁴

Meanwhile, in *Epigr.* 7.82, he seems to evince sympathy for a man who attempted to hide his circumcision in the baths²⁵ while simultaneously making fun of him.

Yet again, in *Epigr.* 7.35, Martial offers the following hierarchy²⁶ of male bodies: that of a Black eunuch slave,²⁷ that of his own (possibly Jewish)²⁸ slave and

²² See, for example, discussion in *GLAJJ* 1:435.

²³ Later satirists mention circumcision but treatment must be presented elsewhere.

²⁴ Martial also uses *Solymis* in *Ep.* 7.55. Tacitus suggests in his *Hist.* 5.2 that one explanation for the origin of the Jews is that they were *Solymos* who named their city *Heirosolyma* (the name he himself uses to refer to Jerusalem). *Solymis* is used of Jerusalem in the fifth century work of Sidonius Apollinaris (*Epistulae*, 7.9.21).

²⁵ It should be noted that Martial does not specifically mention the term “Jew” in *Epigr.* 7.82. Cohen notes that the man in the poem is said to be wearing a *fibula* (pin). Since such a device could not adhere to a circumcised individual and since the individual is not mentioned as being a Jew, Cohen surmises that the poem thus does not refer to circumcision (see Cohen, *Beginnings*, 358-359). The term, *fibula*, however, may be used more generically to refer to various types of pins. One possible reading for the particular type of *fibula* mentioned in *Ep.* 7.82 is a *theca* - that is, a type of *fibula* (referred to by Martial in *Ep.* 11.35) that would have prevented the glans from being visible. Since, moreover, the literary force of *Ep.* 7.82 hinges on the idea of inadvertent exposure of hidden identity, explicit declaration of that identity would have compromised the mechanics of the poem’s humor.

²⁶ See also Schäfer, *Judeophobia*, 100-2.

²⁷ Reading “*nigra...aluta*” as a reference to a black leather strap as well as the *mentula languida* of a Black eunuch slave. On the use of the term *aluta* as a *mentula*

that of himself, an intact Iberian Roman. Martial considers his slave to be well-endowed and sexually potent and, as may be surmised, in Martial's eyes, handsome except for his circumcision. It may be further argued that Martial is also having his slave undergo epispasm (using of a metal weight to draw down the foreskin)²⁹ in order to correct the perceived deficiency.³⁰

In Martial opinion, his slave's body is somewhere between his own and that of the eunuch in terms of masculine appeal. In other words, being circumcised is not as bad as being a eunuch but certainly not as good as being fully intact. Although, in the poem, Martial seems to express disdain for issues of propriety, it may be

languida see J.N. Adam, *The Latin Sexual Vocabulary* (Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press, 1982), 40 and 220.

²⁸ It should be noted here that Martial does not actually call his slave a Jew. Rather, he suggests he has a "Jewish weight." In light of this, Dwora Gilula suggests that the phrase was simply a way of indicating that Martial's slave had a "super-*mentula*" "typical of lustful, sexually potent Jews," and that, therefore, it cannot be determined that Martial had a Jewish slave. Cohen, on the same grounds, doubts that Martial refers to a Jewish slave. (See Dwora Gilula, "Did Martial have a Jewish Slave? (7:35)," *The Classical Quarterly* 37 (02): 533 and Cohen, *Beginnings*, 351-57). The point has merit. Yet, a question must be raised: Who would most likely be understood as having a "Jewish weight" but a Jewish man? Identification of Martial's slave as a Jew seems, at the very least, one plausible and perhaps the most obvious reading.

²⁹ Reading *pondus* as a reference to the male member as well as a metal weight. Cohen (*Beginnings*, 356) further doubts any reference to a Jewish weight could be to epispasm since Martial compares his slave to himself: "but my slave, to say nothing of me, Laecania, has a Jewish weight under his lack of skin" (Bailey) (*sed meus, ut de me taceam, Laecania, servus Iudaeum nulla sub cute pondus habet*). If *ut de me taceam* is read as an amplification of what has just been said, the gist would be that Martial has been circumcised and is likewise undergoing epispasm. Yet, *ut de me taceam*, may alternatively be read as a negation – that is, as a suggestion that whatever Martial has just said about his slave says "nothing" about Martial himself.

³⁰ Even if exposure of the glans was considered unattractive, a *milah*-circumcised slave deemed, in other respects, to be handsome might still be purchased since the shortened foreskin could be lengthened through relatively simple and inexpensive means (essentially time and the cost of the metal weight).

gleaned, that the woman he addresses in the poem considers (or, rather, feigns) public exposure of the glans through circumcision to be shameful or improper.³¹

While perhaps particular to Martial, it seems plausible that that the range of attitudes presented by the satirist in his *Epigrams* mirrors, to some extent, the range of diverse and even somewhat conflicted attitudes found in Roman society of his time towards circumcised men. Circumcised men, in other words, on account of the exposure of their glans, may have been subject to a various mix of ridicule, shame disdain and pity.

2.3 Physical Concerns

Apart from social concerns, one of the most immediate considerations for those contemplating circumcision would have been for the pain and physical ramifications involved. As with any surgical procedure, some chance of complication was always possible. Pain, meanwhile, would have been guaranteed. An ancient bas-relief from Saqqara, Egypt illustrates the point. It depicts youths standing while being circumcised by seated priests with knives in hand. One of the inscriptions reads: “Hold him and do not allow him to faint.”³² In addition, Gen 34:25 states that on the third day following their circumcision, the men of Shechem were still in pain. Meanwhile, Philo, in *Spec* 1.3, refers to the “severe pains” endured by those who underwent the rite, presumably in Alexandria. Although there is evidence of the ancient use of drugs (particularly opium, for soporific anesthetic

³¹ See also *Epigr.* 7.30.

³² David L. Gollaher, *Circumcision: A History of the World's Most Controversial Surgery* (New York: Basic Books, 2000), 2.

purposes), dangers too were noted³³ and anesthetic techniques may not have been as refined as in the present day.

Of course, the degree of pain involved would have been related to type of procedure performed and the amount of skin affected or removed. This leads to another question, which it may be argued, would certainly have been a question, if not concern, in the minds of men contemplating circumcision: How much skin, exactly, was to be removed?

2.3.1 How Much Skin was Removed? *Milah* or *Periah*?

The amount of skin removed or affected in circumcision would, of course, depend upon the type of procedure performed. Although more attention has been paid to the topic in recent years, perhaps due in part to the paucity of and lack of clear discussion found in the relevant sources along with consideration of circumcision in more abstract theological terms, there has, historically, been little if any real attention in New Testament studies to the question of how circumcision was physically carried out in Paul's time. The term "circumcision" is sometimes simply assumed to refer to a procedure entailing the removal of the entirety of the foreskin. In terms of what was practiced in the first century CE, however, was this always the case?

In an article entitled, "*Brit Milah*: A Study in Change in Custom," Nisan Rubin argues that the original practice of circumcision did not entail removal of the entire foreskin. He suggests that an additional step, *periah*, was an innovation of the

³³ See José C. Diz, et. al., eds., *The History of Anesthesia* (Amsterdam: Elsevier Science B.V., 2002).

Rabbis that became instituted following the Bar Kokbha revolt of the 2nd century CE. Rubin, relying on rabbinic sources, suggests that Jews underwent epispasm in order to avoid persecution during the reign of Hadrian. He further suggests that the rabbis added *periah* in order to ensure that circumcision could not be reversed.³⁴

To make a case for the early practice of *milah*, Rubin notes the specific distinction that the Rabbis themselves make between *milah* and *periah*. He points, moreover, to references to epispasm found in *Jub.* 15:33-34, 1 Macc 1:1-15, Paul (1 Cor 7:18) as well as in rabbinic sources. Since it is difficult to perform epispasm unless some of the foreskin remains, Rubin understands these sources to indicate the practice of *milah*. In addition, he notes that the Samaritans continue the practice of *milah* and reject the Jewish practice of *periah* in favor of what they deem to be the older tradition.³⁵

Rubin argues, moreover, that the Rabbis used “*ex post facto* interpretations” of the biblical text as justification for a shift in the halakhic practice. Thus, he suggests:

Following the exegetical method of R. Akiva, they taught “Himol yimol [he must be circumcised – double wordings]’ (Gen 17:13) – from there you learn of two circumcisions, one [himol] for circumcision, and the other [yimol] for *periah*.” And according to the method of R. Ishmael, who did not infer from double wordings, the supportive exegesis was: “She [Zipporah, who circumcised her son] added: A bridegroom of bloods [damim, pl.] of circumcision” (Exod. 4:26). The use of the plural implies two acts: one the

³⁴ Nisan Rubin, “Brit Milah: A Study in Change of Customs,” in *The Covenant of Circumcision* (ed. Elizabeth Wyner Mark; Hanover, N.H.: Brandeis University Press, 2003), 87-97. Others have likewise suggested that the Rabbis mandated *periah* in order to make epispasm more difficult. See Robert Hall, “Epispasm and the Dating of Ancient Jewish Writings,” *JSP* (1988), 74.

³⁵ Rubin, “Brit Milah,” 94-5.

blood of the actual circumcision and the other the blood of the *periah* incision.³⁶

Another passage that might have been used for support for *periah* may have been Josh 5:2, which states that Joshua circumcised the Israelites “a second time” – that is, the second time corporately since the time of the Exodus from Egypt but, in addition or alternatively, in the sense of *periah*.

While Rubin is certainly correct in highlighting the distinction of *milah* from *periah*, a case may be made that the latter was not a novel innovation of the rabbis but, rather, a long-standing practice. Thus, for example, while Philip King, acknowledges Rubin’s thesis,³⁷ he also points out that the Assyrian reliefs³⁸ depicting naked and impaled Israelites at the battle of Lachish seem to present figures with the “entire glans” exposed.³⁹ Since the Lachish reliefs were carved in the 8th century BCE, this would seem to suggest that *periah* was introduced at a much earlier date than posited by Rubin. Indeed, it may perhaps have been introduced at an earlier period for precisely the same reasons which Rubin suggests motivated the Rabbis – that is, in order to prevent recircumcision and assimilation with other people groups (such as the Philistines, the Assyrians, etc...). Moreover, it is possible that the same types of interpretation of the biblical text were used as are found in the rabbinic writings.

³⁶ Rubin, “Brit Milah,” 93.

³⁷ Philip J. King, “Gezer and Circumcision,” in *Confronting the Past Archaeological and Historical Essays on Ancient Israel in Honor of William G. Dever* (ed. Seymour Gitin, J. Edward Wright, and J.P. Dessel; Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2006), 336.

³⁸ King, “Gezer,” 333-40.

³⁹ King, “Gezer,” 334.

At least three further textual sources seem to likewise indicate that *periah* was actually practiced prior to the rabbinic period. The first is 4 Ezra 1:32: “for I have rejected your feast days, and new moons, and circumcisions of the flesh (Metzger).” The mention of “circumcisions” here might, of course, simply refer to the multiple circumcisions of the people. Alternatively, however, it might be a reference to two distinct types of circumcisions or, perhaps, one type with two components (*milah* and *periah*) with the sense that *periah* was “rejected.” The meaning is not so clear.

Stronger evidence, however, is found in the book of *Jubilees*:

And now I shall announce to you that the sons of Israel will deny this ordinance and they will not circumcise their sons according to all of this law because some of the flesh of their circumcision they will leave in the circumcision of their sons. (*Jub.* 15:33, Wintermute)

What is meant by “some of the flesh of their circumcision they will leave in the circumcision of their sons”? It may be suggested that “the flesh of their circumcision” which “they will leave” is equivalent to the “shreds of the foreskin” which “remain” referred to in Mishnah (*Shabbat* 19.6). According to the latter, these “shreds” are to be removed. If any remain, the circumcision is considered invalid. The same stance seems to be presented in *Jubilees*. In other words, the suggestion above is that since the “sons of Israel” had performed only *milah* on their sons but not *periah*, they had not completely followed “all” of the law and thus denied the “ordinance.” The Book of *Jubilees* seems, therefore, to indicate two different types of circumcision – one of which the author approved and constituted the proper observance of the command regarding circumcision, *milah* together with *periah*, and

one of which the author disapproves, that is, *milah* alone. Once again, the advocacy of *periah* may have been intended to impede the possibility of epispasm and, thus, assimilation. It seems plausible that the author of Jubilees would have turned to the same biblical texts to support the practice of *periah* as utilized by the Rabbis.

Meanwhile, those practicing *milah* may have likewise looked to the biblical text in support of their particular interpretation of the proper way to perform circumcision. As noted by Rubin the biblical term *milah* seems to be recognized, even by the Rabbis, as involving removal of the only the tip of the foreskin. This also seems to be reflected in the Greek term used in the LXX for “foreskin” – ἀκροβυστία.⁴⁰ Also, if performance of *periah* requires a certain degree of skill, Tzipporah’s seemingly impromptu circumcision of her son in Ex 4: 24-26 may point to an understanding of circumcision as *milah*. Moreover, a textual reference to epispasm seems to be found in Hab 2: 16. There a command to “become foreskinned” (הַעֲרִיכְךָ) is given to one who has caused his neighbor to become drunk in order to look upon their nakedness. Such a reference to epispasm would presuppose *milah*. Finally, those who defined circumcision as *milah* may have emphasized Deut 4:2 (a verse that instructs the Israelites not to add to or subtract from the law).

⁴⁰ The entry for ἀκροβυστία in LSJ is as follows: “Prob. From ἄκρος and a Semitic root, cf. Bab. *buštu* ‘pudenda’, Heb. *bōsheth* ‘shame’”. If ἄκρος is taken to mean “highest” or “farthest point” then ἀκροβυστία might signify the “farthest point of the pudenda,” that is, perhaps, the tip of the foreskin overhanging the glans (although, alternatively, the “height (in metaphorical sense) of shame”). Thus, the command to remove the ἀκροβυστία may have been understood to refer to removal of only of the farthest point or tip of the foreskin.⁴⁰

In addition, it is possible that Diodorus and Strabo understand circumcision to be *milah*. Diodorus, for instance, states the following in the *Bib. hist.*:

all the Troglodytes⁴¹ are circumcised (περιτέμνονται) like the Egyptians with the exception of those who, because of what they have experienced are called "colobi"; for these alone of all who live inside the Straits have in infancy all that part cut completely off (ἀποτέμνοται) with the razor which among other peoples merely suffers circumcision (*Bib. hist.* 3.32.4, Oldfather)⁴²

Understanding "that part" to refer to the foreskin, Diodorus seems to be suggesting that those called "colobi" have their entire foreskin removed while the rest of those living in the "Straits" are "merely" circumcised. In other words, circumcision, according to Diodorus means something less than having the entire foreskin removed. Strabo, speaking of the "Creophagi," that is, seemingly the same people called "colobi" by Diodorus, similarly suggests (in *Geogr.* 16.4.9) that males of this group are "docked" or "mutilated" ("coloboi"/κολοβοί). Strabo further indicates in *Geogr.* 16.2.37 that the Egyptians and Jews, in contrast, practice "circumcision."

The critical question, of course, is the nature of the situation in Paul's day. Aside from what has been mentioned regarding Strabo, it may be noted that Paul

⁴¹ "Troglodytes" = Troglodytes (οἱ Τρωγλοδύται). It may be of note here that Josephus claims the land of Troglodytis was given to Abraham's sons through Keturah. See *A.J.* 1:239 and 2:213.

⁴² As with Herodotus, this passage too seems sometimes overlooked in discussions, again perhaps because it does not specifically mention the Jews and is thus not featured in *GLAJJ*.

himself, in 1 Cor 7:18, seems to pair circumcision with epispasm. Again, since it is difficult to perform epispasm on those who have undergone *periah*, this would seem to suggest that Paul understood circumcision to be *milah*. As noted by Dunn in his commentary on Romans, Paul also seems to allude to epispasm in Rom 2:25.⁴³

Philo of Alexandria, on the other hand, speaks of the “two-fold circumcision”:

When ye reap your reaping, ye shall not finish that which remains of the reaping” (Lev. xix.9). For the lawgiver wishes the virtuous man to be not only a judge of things that differ, distinguishing and separating things which produce and their productions, but to do away with the very conceit that he has the power to distinguish, mowing the very mowing and cutting away the workings of his own mind, in obedience to and belief in Moses' saying that "judgment belongs to God only" (Deut. i.17)...Like the "reaping the reaping" is the two-fold circumcision, which we meet with in such case as that of the lawgiver devising as a new practice a circumcision of circumcision (Gen. xvii. 13), or "the consecration of consecration" (Num. vi. 2), that is, the purification of the very purification of the soul, when we yield to God the prerogative of making bright and clean, and never entertain the thought that we ourselves are sufficient apart from the divine overseeing guidance to cleanse our life and remove from it the defilements with which it abounds (*Somn.* 2:24-25, Colson).

What does Philo mean here by the “two-fold circumcision” or the “circumcision of circumcision”? He seems to describe a two-fold circumcision of the mind: namely, the exercise of the power to distinguish and the removal of the conceit of that very power to distinguish. It may be ventured, however, that, in doing so, Philo is actually correlating the circumcision of the mind with what he understands to be the proper form of physical circumcision, namely, not a single but a two-fold circumcision. In other words, Philo defines physical circumcision in the same way as do the Rabbis of the Mishnah - that is, as consisting of both *milah* as well as *periah*. He seems to draw

⁴³ See James D.G. Dunn, *Romans 1-8*. Word Biblical Commentary, vol. 38a (Dallas: Word Books, 1988), 121.

this from the doubling of the commandment to circumcise (περιτομῇ περιτμηθήσεται) found in Gen 17:13 (LXX), but also perhaps Josh 5. He also compares this two-fold circumcision to the idea of thorough reaping (as indicated by the seemingly redundant Hebraic phrasing “when ye reap the reaping” - Lev 23:9) or the idea of special consecration (that is the “consecration of consecration” of the Nazirite in Num 6.2), suggesting, moreover, that it represents the “purification of the very purification of the soul.” In other words, the soul needs first to be purified. It needs, however, to be additionally or further purified of the possible “conceit” that it was purified through its own doing and not through the primary agency of God. In other words, *milah* represents the purification of the soul while *periah* represents the removal of “conceit.” This concept, as will be discussed in the fourth chapter, has significance for the reading of Paul. For the time being, however, it will be noted that Philo seems to consider circumcision to be two-fold – that is consisting of both *milah* and *periah*.

That Philo considers circumcision to be *periah* seems corroborated by examination of his description of the physical benefits of the rite in *Spec.1:1-12*. In the course of listing reasons for the practice of circumcision, he includes the following:

One is that it secures exemption from the severe and almost incurable malady of the prepuce called anthrax or carbuncle, so named, I believe from the slow fire which it sets up and to which those who retain the foreskin (ποσθένης) are more susceptible. Secondly, it promotes the cleanliness of the whole body as befits the consecrated order, and therefore the Egyptians carry the practice to a further extreme and have the bodies of their priests shaved. For some substances which need to be cleared away collect and secrete themselves both in the hair and the foreskin...The fourth and most

vital reason is its adaptation to give fertility of offspring, for we are told that its causes semen to travel aright without being scattered or dropped into the folds of the foreskin, and therefore the circumcised nations appear the most prolific and populous. (Colson)

The description of the particular benefits here would seem to suggest removal not of a portion of the foreskin but rather the entire foreskin. This seems to be further indicated by the use of term ποσθένης (foreskin) instead of ἀκροβυστίας (“tip of foreskin” – LXX Gen 17:11) as is found in the biblical text. It thus seems that Philo considered circumcision to involve removal of the entire foreskin, that is, to include *periah*. Moreover, it should be noted that in listing these particular benefits, Philo claims to actually be citing reasons that had been handed down by others (*Spec.* 1:8). This would again suggest that the practice of *periah* was not novel in his time.

It might be noted, moreover, that prior to describing the physical benefits of the rite, Philo also mentions the “severe pains” that the operation entails, seemingly describing the procedure as “mutilating”:

all these thousands in every generation undergo the operation and suffer severe pains in mutilating (ἀκρωτηριαζούσας) the bodies of themselves and their nearest and dearest

Philo is, perhaps, describing here the circumcision of infants as well as adults. While he does seem to admit then that the procedure entailed a good deal of pain, his use of the term “mutilating” (ἀκρωτηριαζούσας) is difficult to assess. In any case, while removal of the tip of the foreskin overhanging the glans in the case of an adult male would certainly involve pain, removal of the entire foreskin would, presumably, involve a greater deal of pain.

In summary then, it may be argued, in consideration of King's analysis of the Lachish relief, *Jub.* 15:33, Philo's description of the "two-fold" circumcision and, possibly, 4 Ezra 1:32, that *periah* was actually not an innovation of the Rabbis but an earlier practice. Since, however, Philo mentions the "two-fold" circumcision (indicating *periah*), while Paul and perhaps Strabo seem to indicate *milah* circumcision, a case may be made that both *milah* and *periah* were practiced simultaneously, though perhaps by different communities, during the first century CE.

What is important for the present thesis is that during Paul's time, men would have faced one of two entirely different types of circumcision – either *milah*, that is, removal of only the tip of the foreskin overhanging the glans or *periah*, that is, removal of the entire foreskin. The type of circumcision that would have been faced by an individual contemplating the rite would, perhaps, have depended upon what was typically practiced by Jews in their particular region. It is possible, however, that even within a given location, both types of circumcision may have been practiced.

Moreover, while it is conceivable that some Jews may have considered the type of circumcision performed a matter of personal choice, others, as extant texts seem to indicate, evince a definite position on the matter. That is, they seem to indicate that only one procedure, whether *periah* or *milah*, represented the correct way to perform circumcision.

Only later, as Rubin argues, did the Rabbis mandate *periah*. Again, Rubin understands this move to have been a response to Christian rejection of

circumcision. Yet there would be no need to take this extra step if early Christians had no interest in becoming circumcised. A move to *periah* actually makes better sense if early Christians were actually becoming circumcised. That those in the early movement did, in fact, seek to become circumcised is indicated in Paul's letters. With this in mind, the additional step of *periah*, aside from being understood as an absolute requirement for proper circumcision, might have been mandated in order to distinguish those considered to be followers of true Judaism from those belonging to a movement perceived as heretical. It is possible too that as *periah* perhaps became the more dominant practice in Jewish communities, Roman tolerance for the rite correspondingly waned.

What, in any case, is ultimately important to note here is that, in Paul's day, there were, most likely, two competing methods of circumcision. The type of circumcision to be performed with the corresponding amount of skin to be removed and degree of pain involved would certainly have been of consideration for men contemplating the rite in the first century CE.

2.3.2 Effects on Sensation

Of course, removal of any portion of the foreskin may have also raised concerns regarding the impact on sensation and physical relations. Philo, for example, highlights many medical benefits to circumcision. He also remarks, however, that one of the points of the rite (which, as discussed above, he seems to equate with *periah*) was to reduce male pleasure (*Spec.* 1.9 and *QG* 3.47). As will be discussed further on, Philo himself sees this as a physical and spiritual benefit. It is

possible, however, that this particular consequence of the rite, would have been a concern to many.

2.4 Circumcision as a Household and even National Concern

Finally, it might be noted that circumcision was not merely a personal matter. Wives may also have had opinions about their husband's choices. Moreover, if a head of household was convinced that all of the members of his household should be circumcised then, just as in the case of Abraham, both sons as well as slaves may have been subjected to the rite as well. Depending perhaps upon age, sons, as with slaves, may have had a voice but not necessarily a choice in the matter.⁴⁴

Also, for those in significant positions of power,⁴⁵ there may have been political consequences to assess. According to Josephus in *A.J.* 20.17-48, for example, the subjects of King Izates of Adiabene (a contemporary of Paul), precisely as had been feared by his mother and his Jewish teacher, revolted against the king once they discovered that he, his brother and other male relatives had become circumcised and taken up Jewish customs.

⁴⁴ Titus 1:10-11 may be considered in this regard.

2.5 Summary

From his letters it is apparent that the subject of circumcision was of significant concern for the Apostle Paul. As discussed, in terms of the men he addressed, possible issues raised by this rite would have fallen in various domains including the financial, social even possibly political realms. Those who underwent the rite may have felt embarrassed or hindered in participating in important social institutions such as the bath and gymnasium. Some may have been labeled superstitious and faced ridicule or disdain even from their friends or peers. In addition, there would have been concerns regarding the pain, physical danger and ultimate impact of the rite (whether *milah* or *periah*) in terms of sensation and physical relations. Household members such as wives, sons and male slaves may have also shared some of these concerns. For such reasons, although circumcision was considered in Jewish tradition to have many outstanding benefits (some of which will be touched upon in the following chapter),⁴⁶ certain men may have been reluctant to undergo the rite. As will be seen, Paul, in his epistle to the Romans, may be addressing just such reluctance.

⁴⁶ In rabbinic literature, benefits for circumcision are derived from the biblical text and showcased in overt discussion. In the case of Paul and the New Testament, however, perceived benefits are often discounted and must be discerned through polemic.

3. Was Circumcision Considered Necessary to “Become a Jew”?

3.1 The Bible

As mentioned in the previous chapter, in discussing Jewish views of circumcision in the first century and the basis for the requirement of Gentile circumcision, the importance of the biblical text cannot, perhaps, be underscored enough. Although, in terms of the Hebrew Bible, no explicit link is made between circumcision and “becoming a Jew” (in certain contexts this, would, in any case, be anachronistic), the command regarding circumcision is based upon biblical precept. The biblical corpus and the first five books (Pentateuch) of the Law, in particular, served as the ultimate authoritative base for belief and praxis in Paul’s time. While oral and other written traditions certainly did exist, these traditions themselves often presented commentary or interpretation of material from the biblical corpus. Paul himself continually appeals directly, implicitly or obliquely to the biblical text. Prior to considering later treatments of circumcision and the Gentiles, it is critical to have familiarity with the biblical passages on circumcision. Though not a comprehensive treatment, the following section will highlight a few key passages.

In terms of the Pentateuch, there are four loci in which circumcision is presented in the form of a divine command. Three of these, Gen 17, Ex 12:48 and Lev 12:3 specify circumcision of the flesh. Deut 10:16 meanwhile mandates circumcision of the heart. No overt reference to circumcision is found in the book of Numbers.

Of the three passages specifying circumcision of the flesh, Gen 17 is, of course, foundational. In the opening verse of the chapter, God tells Abraham: “Walk

before me and be perfect.” He then gives Abraham the command regarding circumcision: “ This is my covenant which you will keep, between me and you and between your seed after you; every male among you will be circumcised” (17:10). The particular wording of this verse (This is my covenant...) seems to actually equate the “covenant” with physical circumcision. Verse 11, states, however that circumcision would serve as a sign of the covenant. According to the continuing passage, Abraham was to be circumcised along with all of his sons and all the male servants of his household. Those born in the house were to be circumcised on the eighth day after birth. The command was to be kept for all generations and any who did not become circumcised would be subject to divine severance.⁴⁷

Exodus 12: 48, meanwhile, specifies that the *ger* or stranger in Israel must be circumcised prior to eating the Passover sacrifice. In terms of later reading, anyone who wished to observe the Passover (observance of which is commanded in Lev 23:4-8 and Num 28:16-25) would, in light of this command, have needed to become circumcised.

Finally, Leviticus 12:3 directs that sons be circumcised on the eighth day after birth. It might be noted that whereas the command in Gen 17 is presented within the framework of the Abrahamic covenant, this command is presented within the framework of the Mosaic. Due to the specification of eighth day circumcision, the text may have been used as instruction regarding the children of proselytes, but would not have been directly applicable to adult males.

⁴⁷ The gravity of the command seems to be also illustrated in Ex 4 where Moses’ life seem threatened for failure to circumcise his son.

Gen 34 is also a significant text regarding circumcision. The chapter relates the response of Jacob's sons to the defilement⁴⁸ of their sister, Dinah, by Shechem the Hivite. Although Shechem seeks to marry Dinah, Dinah's brothers assert that it would be a "reproach" for them to give their sister to one who was uncircumcised. The brothers consent to give their sister to Shechem only on the condition that he and all the men of his city become circumcised. This, they suggest would allow the two groups to intermarry and become "one people" (MT אֶחָד לָעָם/LXX ὁς γένος ἓν). The men of the city agree to the demand. According to the narrative, however, the brothers had no intention of giving their sister Dinah to Shechem. Instead, on the third day, when the men of the city are in pain, they kill the men and plunder the city. While there is some ambivalence regarding Levi and Shimon's actions (both within and outside the biblical corpus), Gen 34 seems to have been understood as an indication that those who wanted to marry an Israelite woman needed to become circumcised.⁴⁹

As will be explored to some degree in this present chapter, different exegetes seem to have emphasized different passages or read various passages differently. In certain cases, the arguments behind a certain readings may be readily discernable. In other case, however, the reading might be a bit more complex and nuanced.

⁴⁸ See Gen 34:5.

⁴⁹ In the narrative of Gen 34, the sons of Jacob, when chastised by their father, are given the last word, defending their actions on the grounds that their sister should not be treated like a harlot. In Gen 49: 5-7, on the other hand, Jacob curses the anger and wrath of Levi and Shimon, the two brothers who led the charge in slaying the inhabitants of Shechem. Although there is no explicit reference to the incident, the pairing of the two brothers and the mention of slaying a man, may serve as a reference to the killing of Shechem or his father, Hamor.

3.2 LXX, Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha

The LXX version of the Book of Esther does, however, present a link between circumcision and the idea of “becoming a Jew.” According to the narrative, the Jews, having been rescued from possible annihilation through the intercession of Queen Esther, are allowed to take revenge on their enemies. The MT (4:17) version of the story suggests that, in response, many of the Gentiles “became Jews” (MT **מִתְיִהְיִים**).⁵⁰ The LXX version, meanwhile, adds a detail that these Gentiles were circumcised:

many of the Gentiles (“peoples” or “nations” - ἔθνω) were circumcised and became Jews (ἰουδαίζον) out of the fear of the Jews.

The role of circumcision here is not entirely clear. In consideration of the voluntary circumcision of the *ger*, it is possible that circumcision is not actually understood here to be the necessary initial element in becoming a Jew. Rather, the detail that “many were circumcised” is included in order to emphasize the exigencies of the moment. That is, perhaps, in another situation, circumcision might have been deferred until a later point but, in this case, it was undertaken immediately in order to provide an identifying mark that might aid in protecting individuals from

⁵⁰ Cohen argues, however, that the Hebrew term **מִתְיִהְיִים** in the MT does not mean “became Jews” but rather “professed to be Jews.” He thus suggests that the Gentiles did not actually become Jews but merely pretended to be Jews in order to avoid harm. See Cohen, *Beginnings*, 181.

slaughter. These men then also either “adopted Jewish ways” or officially “became Jews” (ἰουδαίζον) through, for example, the renunciation of their own gods.

On the other hand, in consideration of the insistence on immediate circumcision demanded of the Shechemites by the sons of Jacob, circumcision may be understood here as the actual or most salient means by which the Gentiles “became Jews” (ἰουδαίζον) out of fear of the Jews.⁵¹

The apocryphal book of Judith similarly links circumcision with becoming “joined to the house of Israel”:

And when Achior had seen all that the God of Israel had done, he believed in God greatly, and circumcised the flesh of his foreskin, and was joined unto the house of Israel (καὶ προσετέθη εἰς τὸν οἶκον Ἰσραηλ) unto this day. (Jdt. 14:10, Brenton)

Based on the sequence presented in the text, it seems that the acknowledgement of the God of Israel and circumcision are the means by which or, perhaps, notable steps in the process of becoming “joined” or “added” (προσετέθη) to the house of Israel.

Yet another text that points to circumcision as a means for becoming a Jew is found a fragment of the epic of Theodotus cited in the writings of Alexander Polyhistor and preserved in Eusebius (*Praep. ev.* 9.22.4-6). The passage is as follows:

⁵¹ Through a review of *-izein* verbs elsewhere, Cohen suggests that the LXX term does not signify the adoption of Jewish identity but, rather, the offering of political support to the Jews. See Cohen, *Beginnings*, 175-82.

Jacob said that he would not give her until all the inhabitants of Schechem were circumcised and became Jews...Jacob says, 'For this is not allowed to the Hebrews to bring sons-in-law or daughters-in-law into their house from elsewhere but, rather, whoever boasts that he is of the same race (Fallon).

Drawing upon the narrative of Gen 34, this passage presents circumcision as the means by which one can become a Jew and be brought into the "house" as part of the "same race." As will be noted later, the stated acceptance of only the one who "boasts" about being of the same race is of particular interest in reading Paul.

Meanwhile, Bel and the Dragon, does not mention circumcision but instead seems to highlight the renunciation of idolatry as the chief element in becoming a Jew. According to the story, the Babylonian worshippers of Bel presume that their king, Cyrus of Persia, had "become a Jew" (Ιουδαίος γέγονεν, Bel 1.28) because he allowed Daniel to kill the priests of Bel and to destroy the sanctuary and clay image of Bel as well as a brass dragon that they worshipped. Notably, there is no mention of circumcision or baptism in the story. It may be assumed from the narrative that the Babylonians determine that Cyrus had "become a Jew" due to their knowledge of the influence of his Jewish courtier, Daniel, and the king's support for the utter destruction of their cult. The overarching frame of the story suggests, however that the king himself did not completely give allegiance to the God of Israel until he saw the miraculous deliverance of Daniel from lions.

The book of *Jubilees*, on the other hand, seems to suggest that it is actually not possible to become an Israelite. The text records the giving of the covenant of circumcision to Abraham, adding, however, in 15.11-15 that “the soul that was not circumcised on the eighth day” had broken the covenant would thus be “uprooted from its family.” This seemingly unreasonable interpretation actually reflects what is found in LXX of Gen 17.14. Whereas the MT indicates that an uncircumcised male would be cut off, the LXX version of the same text specifies this punishment for the male who is not circumcised on the eighth day. According to *Jubilees*, such individuals were “appointed for destruction and would not be saved.” Meanwhile, elsewhere, in 20.1-4, in an expansion of what is found in the biblical text, *Jubilees* notes that Abraham gathered together his sons and grandsons (Ishmael, Isaac, and the sons of Keturah as well as their respective sons) and commanded them to guard the “way of the Lord” and to “circumcise their sons in the covenant.” As the text elsewhere states, however, only the descendants of Jacob, would be considered a “kingdom of priests and a holy people” (16.17-19, 15.30-31).

3.3 Philo

At least three and perhaps a four views regarding circumcision and Jewish identity may be discerned in the writings of Philo. First, it may be noted that Philo, in *QG* 3.52, indicates his awareness of the view found in *Jubilees* that those who were not circumcised on the eighth day would not be saved. He considers this position harsh and unfair, however, since it seems to punish those who were not responsible for their own state (that is, those who, as infants, were not circumcised

by their parents on the eighth day). Elsewhere, however, Philo in *Migr.* 90 references those who are often termed the “extreme allegorizers” – that is, those who focused on the allegorical significance of circumcision but dismissed the necessity of the physical rite.

Philo’s own view seems to fall somewhere between that found in the Book of Jubilees and that attributed by Philo to the “extreme allegorizers.” As will be argued here Philo seems to have required circumcision but not as an entry point for conversion. Philo’s own position on circumcision, however, is not immediately obvious. As such, scholars have posited a variety of views on the subject. Five of these will be reviewed here. An argument will then be offered that supports the fifth position; namely, that Philo himself did consider circumcision necessary, though not for initial conversion. The specific rationale for Philo’s support of physical circumcision will then be noted and highlighted as having particular implication for the reading of Paul.

Perhaps the best-known passage from Philo on the subject of circumcision is found in the *De Migratione Abrahami*:

It is also true that receiving circumcision does indeed portray the excision of pleasure and all passions, and the putting away of impious conceit, under which the mind supposed it was capable of begetting by it's own power: but let us not on this account repeal the law laid down for circumcising...If we keep and observe these we shall gain a clearer conception of those things of which these are the symbols. (*Migr.* 92-3, Colson)

As may be seen, Philo seems to respond here to those who focused on the allegorical meaning of circumcision and held that physical observance of the law was unnecessary. From the passage it is apparent that while Philo himself places great emphasis on allegorical interpretation, he also deemed the physical commandment to be of value. Indeed, he argues that physical observance of rites such as circumcision actually results in a better understanding of their symbolism. As Philo seems here to speak about the general value of circumcision, it seems reasonable that both he and the extreme allegorizers would have applied their respective views both to those who were born to Jewish parents as well as to the proselyte.

Elsewhere, however, Philo uses Exodus 22:2 to articulate his definition of a “proselyte”:

Scripture first makes it clearly apparent and demonstrable that in reality the sojourner (προσήλυτος) is one who circumcises not his uncircumcision (οὐχ περιτμηθεὶς τὴν ακροβυστίαν) but his desires and sensual pleasures and the other passions of the soul. For in Egypt the Hebrew nation was not circumcised (οὐ περιτέμνητο) but being mistreated with all kinds of mistreatment by the inhabitants in their hatred of strangers (τοὺς ξένους), it lived with them in self-restraint and endurance, not by necessity but rather of its own free choice, because it took refuge in God the Saviour, Who sent His beneficent power and delivered them from their difficult and hopeless situation those who made supplication to Him. Therefore (Scripture) adds, “Ye yourselves know the soul of the sojourner (ψυχὴ προσήλυτος).”⁵² But what is the mind of the sojourner (προσήλυτου διάνοιά) if not alienation from belief in many gods and familiarity with honouring the one God and Father of all? In the second place, some call strangers (τοὺς ξένους) “newcomers” (ἐπήλυδας). But strangers (ξένοι) are also those who by themselves have run to the truth in the same way as those who made their sojourn (ξένιτεύσασιν) in Egypt. For these are newcomers to the land, while those are (newcomers) to laws and customs. But the common name of “newcomers” (ἐπήλυδων) is ascribed to both. (QE 2:2, Marcus)

⁵² LXX Ex 23.9.

Several scholarly views have been presented regarding this text in terms of the question of Philo's view of the role of circumcision in conversion. These include the following: 1) This particular passage, as an exegetical commentary, is not useful for determining Philo's view of proselyte circumcision 2) Philo does not refer here to full proselytes or converts but rather to "God-fearers" or "semi-converts" 3) he refers here to a class of people who were recognized as full proselytes without physical circumcision 4) he refers to physically circumcised proselytes 5) he refers to those accepted as proselytes *prior* to circumcision.

The first view, suggested by Ellen Birnbaum, holds that since this passage is exegetical in nature, it cannot actually be used to address the question of the requirement of circumcision for the proselyte.⁵³ However, while Philo certainly focuses on the allegorical interpretation of scripture, he does not thereby entirely ignore practical matters. Indeed, as seen, while commenting on the allegorical interpretation of circumcision in the *Migr.* 92, Philo points out that although circumcision does have allegorical meaning, the physical rite should not be neglected in favor of singular focus on its signification. Moreover, although the translation of the Armenian above reads: "that in reality the sojourner is," the Greek fragment actually states: "that the sojourner is."⁵⁴ Philo, in other words, is not merely commenting on the idea of the "sojourner" or proselyte. Rather, he is presenting what he considers to be the scriptural *definition* of the proselyte.

⁵³ Ellen Birnbaum, *The Place of Judaism in Philo's Thought* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 2007), 200.

⁵⁴ For the Greek fragment see *Philo*, LCL, 36 n. b. Marcus notes: "The Greek frag....has nothing corresponding to the Arm. *isk*= "in reality" or the like."

Another view is posited both by H.A. Wolfson and Samuel Belkin. Of the passage, Belkin states: "This type of proselyte corresponds to the *ger toshab*, namely, a semi-convert who has only embraced monotheism but has remained a stranger to the laws and customs of the Jews."⁵⁵ As may be seen above, however, Philo goes on to provide another term for "proselytes" in this passage - ἐπήλυδας or "newcomers." He does this precisely to suggest that, just as the Hebrew nation was new to the land, proselytes are "newcomers to laws and customs."

This point is noted by McEleney.⁵⁶ McEleney, however conjectures that if the newcomer worshipped God and kept the "law and customs", Philo "Apparently...would not insist on the fulfillment of the precept of circumcision."⁵⁷ In other words, McEleney understands Philo to accept as full proselytes those who observe the "laws and customs" without ever becoming physical circumcised.

Nolland, however, argues for an alternate reading. Nolland concurs with McEleney that Philo must here refer to full proselytes (and not "semi-convert") noting that this would be consistent with Philo's use προσήλυτος elsewhere.⁵⁸ He points, however, to the fact that in the *Migr.*, Philo "distances"⁵⁹ himself from other

⁵⁵ Samuel Belkin, *Philo and the Oral Law: The Philonic Interpretation of Biblical Law in Relation to the Palestinian Halakah* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1940), 47.

⁵⁶ McEleney, "Conversion," 319-341.

⁵⁷ McEleney, "Conversion," 323.

⁵⁸ Nolland, "Uncircumcised," 173-194.

Nolland states: "McEleney is surely right in giving the same sense to προσήλυτος in each passage. Philo gives no suggestion that a distinctive use of προσήλυτος is here discussed...But do we have to follow McEleney in reading out of the passage a judgment by Philo that proselytes need not be circumcised?" (Nolland, "Uncircumcised," 174).

⁵⁹ Actually, it should be noted that Philo does not just distance himself from this view; he censures it.

allegorists who read circumcision allegorically but forgo the need for observance of the physical command. This, he suggests, should provide caution for reading Philo as dismissive of physical circumcision in this instance.⁶⁰ In contrast to McEleney then, Nolland sees Philo as referring not to full proselytes who will never be physically circumcised but rather to full proselytes who are *already* physically circumcised.

Finally, Peder Borgen and John J. Collins offer another perspective. Both seem to understand Philo as expecting circumcision but dismissing it as an entry requirement into the Jewish community.⁶¹ Collins states:

We may assume that Philo would “blame” a convert who did not fulfill the literal commandments, including circumcision, but the ritual is not an entrance requirement and its omission does not necessarily exclude the proselyte from the Jewish community, at least in theory⁶²

⁶⁰ Nolland goes on to note, however, that a specific formulation used elsewhere by Philo for literal readings is absent here (Nolland, “Uncircumcised,” 176). In view of this, he argues that Philo should here be read in this case as highlighting the allegorical meaning of the text. Nolland further states: “The point for comparison with Philo’s modern day proselytes is not the lack of circumcision but the moral and religious stance of the Israelites in Egypt” (Nolland, “Uncircumcised,” 178). In other words, Nolland understands Philo as making a comparison between the Hebrew nation and the proselyte, not on the basis of a similarity on the physical matter of circumcision but rather on in terms of their spiritual position.

⁶¹ Peder Borgen, “The Early Church and the Hellenistic Synagogue,” *Studia Theologica* 37 (1983), 55-78 and John J. Collins, “A Symbol of Otherness: Circumcision and Salvation in the First Century” in *To See Ourselves as Others See Us: Christians, Jews and “Others” in Late Antiquity* (eds. Jacob Neusner and Ernest S. Frerichs; Chico: Scholars Press, 1985), 171-176.

⁶² Collins, “A Symbol,” 174.

Both Borgen and Collins appeal to later rabbinic texts for this reading. Whether or not the later rabbinic sources actually indicate the acceptance of converts without circumcision, however, is likewise debated.

Yet appeal to later rabbinic material, while perhaps helpful in some ways, is actually not necessary here. Support for the view that Philo is referring to those who are accepted as proselytes prior to circumcision may be found in considering *QE* 2.2 together with *Migr.* 92-93. In *QE* 2.2 Philo explains that, essentially, the Hebrew nation was, itself, a "sojourner" (that is, *προσήλυτος* or proselyte) and, as suggested, in Ex 22:22, a nation that knows the "soul of a sojourner (proselyte)."

He seems, moreover, to make a comparison between the proselyte and the Hebrew nation based on circumcision: Just as the proselyte who is not physically circumcised, so too, at one time, the Hebrew nation was not physically circumcised. Although he does not specifically mention it, it is likely that Philo is working here from Joshua 5:2-7. This passage indicates that none of the members of the nation born in the wilderness were circumcised. It was only *after* they crossed the Jordan and entered the promised land that the male members of the nation were circumcised. Thus, when the Hebrews first crossed over and arrived in the land as "newcomers," they were not physically circumcised. However, while they were still in Egypt, they had *already* turned to God their Savior. In this way, even prior to being physically circumcised, they showed that they were circumcised in the "desires and sensual pleasures and the other passions of the soul." Similarly, proselytes, though not physically circumcised, are "newcomers to laws and customs." Having already given up their past worship for "the one God and Father

of all," they too demonstrate circumcision of "desires and sensual pleasures and the other passions of the soul." They are thus counted as part of the nation even *prior* to being physically circumcised.

With this in mind, it may be suggested that since, as seen in *Migr.* 92-93, Philo does see a value to physical circumcision and since, in his view, the proselyte is one who has turned to God, has left behind old practices and accepted new "laws and customs," it would follow that he would have expected the proselyte, like the Hebrew nation, to eventually become physically circumcised. The proselyte is, after all, precisely a "newcomer" to laws and customs. In light of this, the proposition made by Borgen and Collins may be affirmed, namely that Philo viewed the proselyte a full convert and thus part of the Hebrew nation - not *without* physical circumcision but rather *prior to* the physical act of circumcision. For Philo, the critical turning point for both the Hebrew nation and the proselyte is not in the act of circumcision but rather the acknowledgement of and appeal to the one true God.

As mentioned earlier, Philo does consider circumcision of value on a physical level. Critically, however, he also seems have considered physical circumcision necessary for salvation in the world to come:

But as for the deeper meaning, that which is excessively male in us is the mind. This He commands to be circumcised in the ogdoad for the reason which I gave earlier; and (He mentions) no other part but the flesh of the foreskin, symbolizing those sense-pleasures and impulses which afterwards come to the body Wherefore He adds a principle of law in His statement. For the mind which is not circumcised and purified and sanctified of the body and the passions which come through the body will be corrupted and cannot be saved. And since the argument does not concern man but the mind which has health, He adds, "that soul shall be destroyed" – not the human body or man but the soul and the mind. And from what? From its kind," he says. For

the whole genus is incorruptible; thus from incorruption the sinner is brought to corruption. (*QG* 3.52, Marcus)

Philo here seeks to explain why circumcision of the flesh is commanded. On the one hand, he suggests that the foreskin is a symbol of the “sense-pleasures” and “impulses” that come to the body. Thus, on one level, he seems to point to the idea of physical circumcision as a symbolic representation of the removal of “sense-pleasures” and “impulses.”

Significantly, however, he also says: “the mind which is not circumcised and purified and sanctified of the body and the passions which come through the body will be corrupted and cannot be saved.” This is a dense but important statement. Philo seems here to connect the circumcision of the mind with the purification and sanctification of the body and the “passions which come through the body.” It is possible that he is suggesting here that the circumcised mind results in a body that is purified and sanctified of the body and its passions. The statement Philo makes, however, is found in the context of a discussion regarding the rationale for physical circumcision. Moreover, as discussed earlier, Philo states elsewhere that physical circumcision dulls male pleasure (*Spec.* 1.9 and *QG* 3.47). With these points in mind, it may be ventured that Philo is actually indicating that physical circumcision is required for the purification and sanctification of the body and its passions. This, in turn, allows the mind to be “circumcised” and thus, ultimately, to be “saved.” The notion that circumcision is a requirement for salvation is also found in Acts 15:1.⁶³

⁶³ On the link between circumcision and salvation see also: *Odes Sol.* 11, 4 *Barki Nafshi*.

Philo's own position may thus be understood as follows: Circumcision has physical benefits. It is necessary for the sake of purity and sanctification of body, for controlling the bodily passions, the passions of the mind and, ultimately, for salvation. Though not an initial entry requirement, circumcision should eventually be performed by the proselyte.

Finally, Philo may also indicate the viewpoint that circumcision was required for conversion – not explicitly but in the way in which he treats the command in *De Specialibus Legibus*. In *Spec.* 1.1.1-1.2.11 Philo prefaces his treatment of the specific commands of the Mosaic Law with a treatment of circumcision. As argued here, Philo himself did not consider circumcision necessary for entry into the Hebrew nation. Others, however, did. In this way, circumcision was a “portal”⁶⁴ command to the nation and its laws. Philo thus deals with the commandment of circumcision prior to treating any of the other commands, not because he somehow considered it to fall completely outside of the domain of the Mosaic law, but because non-Jews might be inclined to discount the entirety of the Mosaic law on account of the seeming ridiculousness of the first one presented to them – namely, the law concerning circumcision. In this way, Philo's work indicates the view that the command regarding physical circumcision was considered a critical “entry” requirement.

⁶⁴ See Feldman, *Jew and Gentile*, 156-57.

3.4 Josephus

Josephus, it may be argued, presents an even greater spectrum of views regarding circumcision than Philo. In *A.J.* 20.139, for example, the historian mentions two cases in which Gentile men are required to convert to the Jewish religion as a prerequisite for marriage:

After receiving this gift from the emperor, Agrippa gave his sister Drusilla in marriage to Azizus king of Emesa, who had consented to be circumcised. Epiphanes, son of King Antiochus, had rejected the marriage since he was not willing to convert to the Jewish religion, although he had previously contracted with her father to do so. (Feldman)

According to Josephus, King Agrippa was willing to give his sister Drusilla in marriage to King Azizus only on the condition that Azizus would be circumcised. The notion of circumcision as a prerequisite for marriage is, of course, also found in the fragment of Theodotus and finds precedence in the biblical account of Gen 34. According to Josephus, however, Azizus, had not been the first choice. Epiphanes, the son of King Antiochus of Commagene had originally agreed to the marriage,⁶⁵ but later rejected it because he “was not willing to convert to the Jewish religion.” Inasmuch as he indicates that King Azizus “consented to be circumcised” while King Antiochus “refused to convert to the Jewish religion,” Josephus might be understood here as implying that undergoing circumcision was considered an act of conversion

⁶⁵ See also *A.J.* 19.355.

to the Jewish religion. Given the circumstances, circumcision seems, at least, a token of consent to take up or defer to and abide by the traditions of the wife. It may be that Epiphanes refused the marriage with Drusilla because he did not wish to be circumcised and/or because he did not wish to convert to the Jewish religion.

Another instance in which circumcision is presented as a prerequisite for marriage is found in *A.J.* 20.145-6:

After the death of Herod, who had been her uncle and husband, Berenice lived for a long time as a widow. But when a report gained currency that she had a liason with her brother, she induced Polemo, king of Cilicia, to be circumcised and to take her in marriage; for she thought that she would demonstrate in this way that the reports were false. Polemo was prevailed upon chiefly on account of her wealth. The marriage did not, however, last long, for Berenice, out of licentiousness, according to report, deserted Polemo. And he was relieved simultaneously of his marriage and of further adherence to the Jewish way of life. (Feldman, LCL)

As may be seen, Berenice requested that Polemo be circumcised, again apparently as a condition for marriage. Here too, the requirement seemed to go hand in hand with “adherence to the Jewish way of life” – one that Polemo seems to have assumed during his marriage to Berenice and readily relinquished once the marriage failed. Indeed the Josephan account suggests that although Polemo was willing to be circumcised, he did so mainly in order to marry Berenice and profit from her financial status. This motive is also evocative of the biblical story in Genesis 34 which suggests that while Shechem willingly underwent the painful procedure for the sake of his love for Dinah, the other Shechemites were perhaps circumcised with the possibility of gain through intermarriage in mind (“their livestock, substance and every beast of theirs – will they not be ours?” (Gen 34:23)).

Another passage, briefly mentioned earlier and of particular help in considering the question of the role of circumcision in “becoming a Jew” is Josephus’ account, of the conversion of the King Izates of Adiabene (*A.J.* 20.17-96). According to the narrative, the king is introduced to Judaism through the wives of King Abennerigus of Charax Spasini as well as the influence of a Jewish merchant named Ananais. Upon learning that his own mother had been “brought over” (*A.J.* 20.35) to the laws of the Jews, King Izates becomes keen on converting. Josephus suggests, moreover that, “since he considered that he would not be genuinely a Jew unless he was circumcised, he was ready to act accordingly” (*A.J.* 20.38). The king’s mother, however, fearing that his subjects would not tolerate someone who practiced “strange and foreign” rites⁶⁶ strongly discourages this. Ananias too, fearing that the people would hold him personally responsible for teaching the king “unseemly practices” discourages the king from becoming circumcised - even threatening to leave the land if Izates were to go through with the rite. It may thus be presumed that it was from Ananias himself that Izates gleaned the notion that circumcision was necessary to become a Jew. Ananias, however, assures the king that it was acceptable for him to remain uncircumcised given the circumstances presenting the following rationale (*A.J.* 20.41):

The king could, he said, worship God even without being circumcised if indeed he had fully decided to be a devoted adherent of Judaism, for it was this that counted more than circumcision. He told him, furthermore, that God

⁶⁶ See also *A.J.* 20.47.

Himself would pardon him if, constrained thus by necessity and by fear of his subjects, he failed to perform this rite. (Feldman, LCL)

It seems that while Izates himself did not consider that he would be “genuinely a Jew unless he was circumcised” (*A.J.* 20.38), Ananias was able to convince him that it was permissible if he did not go through with the procedure. Many have understood this passage as suggesting that Ananias was able to convince Izates that it was sufficient for him to worship God (τὸ θεῖον σέβειν) without the status of a full convert garnered through the act of circumcision. Joyce Reynolds and Robert Tannenbaum, for example, state the following: "So it is clear that τὸ θεῖον σέβειν, to respect/fear God after the manner of the Jews (as Izates did), was not the same as to adopt the Jewish Law (as Izates' mother did), but some lesser commitment."⁶⁷ In other words, Reynolds and Tannenbaum view Izates not as a full proselyte but rather as a "God-fearer."

There are several difficulties, however, with such a reading. First, it should be noted that Josephus generally applies the verb σέβω not to distinguish a particular group of semi-proselytes but rather simply in reference to Israelite worship (as in *A.J.* 4.318, 8.280, 9.264, 10.50) or even the worship of non-Jews (for example, the Samaritans 11.85, 87).⁶⁸ Indeed, as Gary Gilbert notes, apart from one reference in *A.J.* 14.110 to non-Jews who show reverence to God, "it is Jews, not

⁶⁷ Joyce Reynolds and Robert Tannenbaum, *Jews and Godfearers at Aphrodisias* (Cambridge: Cambridge Philological Society, 1987), 50. See also Cohen's analysis in *Beginnings*, 151.

⁶⁸ Gary Gilbert, "The Making of a Jew: "God-Fearer" or Convert in the Story of Izates," *Union Seminary Quarterly Review* 44 (1991): 299-313.

Gentile 'god-fearers,' who are the ones most often described as worshippers of God."⁶⁹

Moreover, as seen earlier, Louis Feldman translates *A.J.* 20.41 in the following manner:

The king could, he said, worship God even without being circumcised if indeed he had fully decided to be a devoted adherent of Judaism, for it was this that counted more than circumcision.

The line, however, may be more literally rendered perhaps as follows:

δυνάμενον δ' αὐτὸν ἔφη καὶ χωρὶς τῆς περιτομῆς τὸ θεῖον σέβειν, εἴγε
πάντως κέκρικε ζηλοῦν τὰ πάτρια τῶν Ἰουδαίων τουτ' εἶναι
κυριώτερον τοῦ περιτέμνεσθαι

and he [the king], he said, could worship God even without circumcision, if he had fully decided to be zealous for the ancestral laws of the Jews, for this is more decisive than being circumcised.

Reynolds and Tannenbaum translate the latter part of the line as follows:

⁶⁹ Gilbert, "The Making of a Jew," 306.

if indeed he has genuinely decided to pursue wholeheartedly the ancestral ways (?practices, ?teaching) of the Jews" and understand *ta patria* in the text as signifying something less than the Jewish law.⁷⁰

Yet *ta patria* (τὰ πάτρια) would seem to signify those laws particular to Jews even more so than νόμους (*A.J.* 20.35), the term of more general sense used by Josephus to signify the laws to which Izates' mother had been brought over.⁷¹ Also, and in any case, the text seems to indicate that Ananias' very point to the king was that it is having zeal for τὰ πάτρια τῶν Ἰουδαίων, that is the ancestral laws (or perhaps the "traditions," "customs" or "rules of the fathers" of the Jews), presumably through commitment to their observance,⁷² that is more decisive (κυριώτερον - or, perhaps, "is more authoritative," "legitimizes more," "validates more")⁷³ than circumcision in rendering one a Jew.

More significantly, in *A.J.* 20.42, Ananias suggests that God would *pardon* the fact that Izates had not been circumcised:

He told him, furthermore, that God Himself would pardon him if, constrained thus by necessity and fear of his subjects, he failed to perform this rite.

⁷⁰ Reynolds and Tannenbaum, *Jews and Godfearers*, 50.

⁷¹ See the Whiston translation: "and he said that he might worship God without being circumcised, even though he did resolve to follow the Jewish law [*ta patria*] entirely, which worship of God was of a superior nature to circumcision. He added, that God would forgive him, though he did not perform the operation, while it was omitted out of necessity, and for fear of his subjects." See also Gilbert, "The Making of a Jew," 308.

⁷² In Gal 1:14. Paul seems to indicate that his advancement in Judaism was due to the "zeal" he had for his ancestral laws.

⁷³ See entry for κυριώτερον in LSJ.

This would seem to suggest that, according to Josephus, failure to observe the rite was, in fact, viewed by Ananias as a transgression of some kind or a sin.⁷⁴ Indeed, Ananias' suggestion does seem an allowance only made given the gravity of the possible repercussions – the possible deposition of, harm to or threat to the life king. Again, if, in Josephus' view, Ananias considered the king to be a God-fearer, and thus someone not required to be circumcised, what reason would there be for God's pardon? If, on the other hand, according to Josephus, Ananias considered the king to be a Jew by Ananias, the king's failure to be circumcised would be understood as a transgression but one that would be overlooked by God because of the dangers involved in electing to do so. This would be consistent with later Jewish texts that indicate that circumcision might be dismissed in the case the rite would present a threat to the individual's life, particularly in the case of hemophiliacs.

In the narrative, the king is convinced by Ananias' arguments for a time. Later, however, another Jewish man, Eleazar, persuades the king to finally become circumcised. The account in *A.J.* 20.43-5 continues as follows:

And so, for the time, the king was convinced by his [Ananias'] arguments. Afterwards, however, since he had not completely given up his desire, another Jew, Eleazar who came from Galilee and who had a reputation for being extremely strict when it came to the ancestral laws urged him to carry out the rite. For when he came to him to pay him his respects and found him reading the law of Moses, he said: 'In your ignorance, O king, you are guilty of the greatest offence against the law and thereby against God. For you ought not merely to read the law but also and even more, to do what is commanded in it. How long will you continue to be uncircumcised? If you have not yet read the law concerning this matter read it now, so that you may know what an impiety it is that you commit (Feldman).

⁷⁴ See also Nolland, "Uncircumcised," 173-194.

Josephus here states that Izates had not “given up his desire.” This “desire” seems to reference to his initial desire to be “confirmed as Jewish” or to be “firmly/securely/truly a Jew” (βεβαίως Ἰουδαῖος) through the act of circumcision (A.J. 20.38). This suggests that despite Ananias' assurances, Izates himself did not feel he would be securely a Jew until he was circumcised. In addition, having found the king reading the law of Moses, Eleazar declares the king guilty of committing “the greatest offense against the law and thereby against God” (τὰ μέγιστα τοὺς νόμους καὶ δι’ αὐτῶν τὸν θεὸν ἀδικῶν – or “the greatest of offenses/transgressions/unrighteousness against the laws”) and an act of “impiety” (ἀσέβεια) by failing to perform the rite. If Eleazar understood the king as someone who was *not* required to become circumcised, why would he reprimand him in this manner?⁷⁵ He does not here merely encourage Izates to take what might be deemed a higher status – from “God-fearer” to that of a convert. Rather, he accuses him, essentially, of breaking the law.

Eleazar thus seems to have understood the king as being *already* subject to the law of Moses and, on this basis, guilty of transgression. Perhaps, prior to his arrival, Eleazar had been apprised that Izates had taken upon himself the law of Moses and declared himself a Jew. As the story continues, Eleazar urges the king to read, if he had not done so already, the particular law concerning the uncircumcised. Unfortunately, Josephus does not mention the specific passage. The most likely textual candidate however, is Gen 17⁷⁶ since, as mentioned, Lev 12:1-3, the other passage in the “law of Moses” in which circumcision is presented most clearly as a

⁷⁵ See also Gilbert, “The Making of a Jew,” 308.

⁷⁶ Gilbert, “The Making of a Jew,” 308.

command, more specifically directs the circumcision of an infant and does not state a punishment for remaining uncircumcised.⁷⁷ Gen 17 suggests that a man who is not circumcised in the flesh of his foreskin has transgressed God's covenant and will be cut off from his people (Gen 17:14). In terms of the narrative assumption, Eleazar, based on this verse, would have viewed the lack of circumcision a transgression. Moreover, he may have deemed it worse for the king to be “cut off” by God than to suffer possible harm from his subjects. Of course, since Izates had originally been keen on being circumcised, he does not need much convincing and immediately undergoes the rite (*A.J.* 20.46).

In the continuation of the story, the king informs his mother and Ananias of having been circumcised. Both are struck with fear as to what this might bode for Izates (*A.J.* 20.47):

They were immediately seized with consternation and fear beyond measure that, if it should be proved that he had performed the act, the king would risk losing his throne, since his subjects would not submit to government by a man who was a devotee of foreign practices.

⁷⁷ The Genesis command, though pre-Sinatic, would have been considered Mosaic since it falls in the body of scripture thought to have been written by Moses. The Sinatic command would have been understood as having been based on the command in Genesis. In the New Testament we find the following: “Moses gave you circumcision (not that it is from Moses but from the fathers)” (John 7:22). In addition, Josephus himself writes that Eleazar “who had a reputation for being extremely strict when it came to the ancestral laws (τὰ πάτρια) urged the king to carry out the rite”. This seems to suggest that Eleazar considered circumcision as part, not only of the Mosaic law, but also of the ancestral laws (τὰ πάτρια) of the Jews.

Indeed subsequent episodes, in which the nobles of the country twice attempt to dethrone and kill the king, suggest that their fears were not unfounded. Josephus continues at this point noting in *A.J.* 20.48, however, that:

It was God who was to prevent their fears from being realized. For although Izates himself and his children were often threatened with destruction, God preserved them, opening a path to safety from desperate straits. God thus demonstrated that those who fix their eyes on Him and trust in Him alone do not lose the reward of their piety.

As this comment appears immediately after the story of Izates' circumcision and the reaction of his mother and Ananais, it is likely that Josephus intends the reader to understand the king's decision to undergo the rite of circumcision as an act demonstrating his piety (εὐσεβείᾳ). Also, considering this comment, it may be surmised that Josephus himself favors the view presented by Eleazar regarding circumcision.

From what has been gleaned, the various views presented in the text may be summarized as follows: 1) According to Ananias, in order to become a Jew, one should be physically circumcised. However, in extenuating circumstances, where the threat to one's life may be involved, it is possible to be considered a genuine Jew by adhering to the ancestral laws of the Jews with the exception of circumcision. The decision to be “zealous for the laws of the fathers” not circumcision, serves as the decisive factor in Jewish identity. Failure to undergo circumcision would be

considered a transgression but one that would be overlooked by God due to exigent circumstances. 2) Eleazar seems to consider Izates a Jew (unless, perhaps, he considers the law universal!) without circumcision. As with Ananias, he may well have considered acceptance of the “laws of the fathers” as a sufficient for initially becoming a Jew. Unlike, Ananias, however, he seems to consider it the greatest transgression of the law to remain uncircumcised, irrespective of the possible dangers involved (since, perhaps, while harm from humans may or may not come to pass, punishment from God for failing to be circumcised is assured). In other words, for Eleazar, circumcision is not requisite to become a Jew but it is a great impiety for a Jew to remain uncircumcised. He seems to deem this the case even for those who might not be specifically aware of the punishment for failure to carry out the rite. 3) Helena seems to have thought that if Izates became circumcised, he would become a Jew and this would not have been tolerated by his subjects. 4) In the opinion of Izates, to be securely a Jew, one must be circumcised (although, for a time, he is persuaded by the argument of Ananias that one can be considered a Jew without circumcision). 5) Finally, as mentioned, Josephus’ view is not entirely clear here in terms of whether or not he considered circumcision requisite for *becoming* a Jew but it does seem that he viewed circumcision as requisite for maintaining pious standing before God.

Of course the story of Izates illustrates the idea that there were Gentiles who were willing and even, perhaps, eager to undergo the procedure of circumcision despite the dangers involved. Josephus, however, also presents two cases in which

Gentiles took it upon themselves to be circumcised precisely in order to avoid danger. The first, *A.J.* 11.285, is found in Josephus' version of the story of Esther:

And, when the letter of the king was published, joy and the light of salvation came upon the Jews both in the city and in the provinces, so that many of the other nations also, from fear of the Jews, had themselves circumcised and thereby managed to avoid danger. (Marcus)

As mentioned, the similar text in the LXX (*Esth* 9:17) relates: "many Gentiles were circumcised and became Jews for fear of the Jews." Both the LXX and Josephus seem to suggest then that circumcision was thought by these Gentiles to have been a way of avoiding danger from the Jews of the land.

In a similar case, Josephus suggests that during the first Jewish Revolt, the Roman commander Metilius saved his life in the face of the Jewish rebel leader Eleazar's treachery "by entreaties and promises to turn Jew, and even to be circumcised" (*B.J.* 2.454, Thackery).⁷⁸ There is no indication in the narrative that Eleazar,⁷⁹ or his men propose that Metilius become Jewish or circumcised. Rather, Metilius seems to make these promises as a way to be saved from slaughter.

The meaning of the term ἰουδαΐσσειν is not agreed upon here. As may be seen, Thackery translates Josephus' phrase μέχρι περιτομῆς ἰουδαΐσσειν: "to turn

⁷⁸ Alternatively, "For this one, approaching as a suppliant and taking upon himself/consenting even to the point of circumcision/even as far as being circumcised to turn Jew, they alone preserved/saved."

⁷⁹ This is not the same Eleazar as mentioned in the story of King Izates. Eleazar is a common name in Josephus.

Jew, and even to be circumcised.” Cohen, on the other hand, speculates that the term ἰουδαΐσεν may mean here “to judaize” rather than to “turn Jew.” In other words, he suggests that ἰουδαΐσεν signifies the adoption of certain Jewish customs but something *less* than becoming a Jew. He then offers the possibility that understanding the term ἰουδαΐσεν as a reference to the adoption of certain Jewish customs taken together with the offer to become circumcised, would represent the “functional equivalent of conversion.”⁸⁰

Cohen likewise, while open to a cultural meaning of ἰουδαΐσεν actually prefers a political understanding of the term. He suggests that Metilius, in offering to become circumcised, was demonstrating “proof of his new loyalty” but that the “God of the Judeans” had “no part in Metilius’ calculations.”⁸¹ He also points out that a seeming counterpart term found in *B.J.* 2.562, ῥωμαϊζόντων (“romanizing”), has a political sense.⁸²

These points are certainly worth noting. According to Josephus’ narrative in *B.J.* 2.462-3, however, the Jewish rebels had just committed treachery against an oath they had made with Metilius’ troops, slaughtering the unarmed soldiers without mercy in their determination to fight against Rome for the sake of liberty and the defense of the Temple of their God. In terms of the context then, it seems

⁸⁰ Cohen, *Beginnings*, 183.

⁸¹ Cohen, *Beginnings*, 155.

⁸² Cohen, *Beginnings*, 155.

doubtful that the offer of Roman political support⁸³ or the mere adoption of certain Jewish customs would have sufficed in placating the rebels.

Rather, in terms of Josephus' telling of the story, it seems more likely that Metilius, faced with imminent death, would have made the strongest offer possible – that is, to switch sides entirely. He thus immediately pledges to “turn Jew” or “become Jew” (ἰουδαΐσιν) based, perhaps, upon an understanding of the custom of Jews in Rome (who, along with the “extreme allegorizers” mentioned by Philo), did not demand circumcision as a prerequisite or a means for conversion. He pledges, however, to “even to be circumcised” as evidence of his willingness to defer to the greater strictures and requirements for conversion among the Jews in Judea.

Finally, it may be noted that Josephus also mentions the corporate conversions of the both the Itureans (*A.J.* 13.319) and Idumaeans (*A.J.* 13.257-8) by Aristobulus I and John Hyrcanus respectively. Regarding the Idumaeans, Josephus states the following in *A.J.* 13:

257. Hyrcanus also captured the Idumaeans cities of Adora and Marisa, and after subduing all the Idumaeans, permitted them to remain in their country so long as they had themselves circumcised and were willing to observe the laws of the Jews. 258. And so, out of attachment to the land of their fathers, they submitted to circumcision and to making their manner of life conform in

⁸³ Indeed, one might imagine that an offer of political support might have been met with scorn – perhaps even hastening rather than averting the possibility of death!

all other respects to that of the Jews. And from that time on they have continued to be as Jews. (Feldman)

Circumcision figures here, as in the previous instances, as the preliminary or initial step in becoming “as Jews.” Though the Idumaeans may have sometimes been confused with Jews, they maintained their distinct identity.

3.5 Ptolemy the Historian

In another source, the grammarian Ammonius quotes the historian Ptolemy of Ascalon, in order to indicate the distinction between the Jews and Idumaeans:

Jews and Idumaeans differ, as Ptolemy states in his first book of the History of King Herod. Jews are those who are so by origin and nature. The Idumaeans, on the other hand, were not originally Jews, but Phoenicians and Syrians; having been subjugated under them and having been forced to undergo circumcision, so as to be counted among the Jewish nation and keep the same customs, they were called Jews. (Stern)

As may be seen, Ptolemy indicates that the Idumaeans were not originally Jews but were eventually counted with the Jewish nation and called Jews. It is possible that Ptolemy presents a temporal sequence here: the Idumaeans were first subjugated militarily, then compelled to become circumcised, then counted in some way among the nation (though not perhaps as “Jews”) and, finally, having begun to keep the same customs, were called Jews. Alternatively, however, circumcision is understood

to be the means by which the Idumaeans were counted as Jews along with the Jewish nation. The latter, of course, would comport with Gen 34:16 in terms of the notion of circumcision as a means for becoming one people.

3.6 Petronius

One of Petronius' poems, *Frag.* 37, seems of particular interest regarding the question of whether or not physical circumcision was required in order to become a Jew.⁸⁴ Where considered, most scholars understand the poem to refer to a man who, though uncircumcised, is a Jew by descent.⁸⁵ As will be discussed, however, there are other possible readings. The poem itself reads as follows:

A Jew may adore his piggish deity,
And summon the ears of the heights of heaven,
And yet - unless with a knife he severs the border of his loins,
And unless with skill he loosens the knotted head,
Having been removed from his people, he will migrate to Greek cities,
And will not tremble at the fasting sabbaths of the law.⁸⁶

As mentioned, scholars seem to assume that the poem refers to someone who is a Jew by descent but happens not to be circumcised. This is plausible as there are

⁸⁴ See, for example, William Clarke, "Jewish Table Manners in the Cena Trimalchionis," *The Classical Journal* 87 (1992): 257-263.

⁸⁵ See, for example, Cohen, *Beginnings*, 40 and Schäfer, *Judeophobia*, 77.

⁸⁶ Trans., mine with consideration of the translations of Cohen and Schäfer particularly for line 4. See Cohen, *Beginnings*, 40 and Schäfer, *Judeophobia*, 77.

certainly various possible explanations for why a Jew might not have been circumcised. Perhaps one parent or both parents were not very observant. Alternatively, they were religious but, as in the case of Philo's "extreme allegorizers," understood the command regarding physical circumcision to be fulfilled by circumcision of the heart. Yet another possibility is that they feared some adverse consequence for their child, perhaps in consideration of health factors. In another scenario, represented by Timothy (in Acts 16:1-3), the individual might be uncircumcised because one parent was not Jewish. It is possible too that the "Jew" described here is to be understood as an epispaetic individual who was expected to become recircumcised in order to remain with his community.

There are, however, two further possibilities. By "Jew," for example, the poem might actually be read as a reference to someone who is not a "Jew" but wishes to be considered one. That is, since he acknowledges the God of the Jews and observes certain practices such as abstention from pork and the Sabbath, he considers himself to be a "Jew." Members of the Jewish community or synagogue of which he is a part, however, have a different view. According to them, unless he becomes circumcised, he will not be able to remain in their community.⁸⁷ In this case, the term "Jew" here is used somewhat facetiously. In other words, the reference is to someone who considers himself to be a Jew and wishes to be considered a Jew by the Jewish community at large but is not.

On the other hand, considering the force of its placement as the first word in the poem, *Iudaeus* may be read, not in an ironic or sarcastic sense but rather in a

⁸⁷ See also Feldman, *Jew and Gentile*, 156 and 346.

more straight-forward sense. That is, it could be taken to mean someone who had already been accepted by the community as a “Jew.” Again, a comparison may be made with what was discussed earlier regarding Philo’s description of the “incomer” who becomes a Jew by leaving their country and people and becoming joined instead to the Jewish people. Circumcision, however, is still expected at a later date.⁸⁸ In the poem, however, if circumcision is not eventually performed (perhaps within a given probationary period) the individual will be expelled from the community. The term “Jew” might be understood here then in at least three different ways: 1) a person of Jewish decent, 2) a proselyte accepted prior to circumcision with the expectation that circumcision would eventually be performed, or 3) someone who considers himself a Jew but is not accepted as such by the Jewish community.

“Greek cities” similarly might be understood as signifying Greek cities in which the Jew or would-be proselyte could easily give up their Jewish observances entirely. On the other hand, however, it might refer to cities populated by more Hellenized Jews. In the latter case, though initially accepted into the community, unless the individual is circumcised, he will not be able to continue in fellowship. Instead, he will need to migrate to “Greek” cities, particularly those found in the diaspora, such as Alexandria or Rome, which included Hellenized Jewish communities.⁸⁹ In so doing, he would not continue the “fasting sabbaths” of the law;

⁸⁸ Schäfer seems to offer the same observation: “Here Petronius may even be alluding to the question of whether one could be regarded as a full proselyte without having undergone circumcision” (*Judeophobia*, 78).

⁸⁹ See, for example, John 7:35. For the term “Hellenists” see, for example, Acts 6:1, 9:29 and 11:20.

understanding the “fasting sabbaths” here, however, not as a reference to the singular biblical holy day of Yom Kippur but rather to additional non-biblical fast days. This would suggest not a complete disavowal of Jewish practice but rather the adoption of less stringent practices in a more Hellenized Jewish community.⁹⁰

What seems important here, in any case, is precisely that the individual in the poem is called a “Jew” despite being uncircumcised. Unless used facetiously, circumcision is presented not as a requirement for *being* or *becoming* a Jew but rather for *remaining* one.

3.7 Epictetus

As recorded in Arrian’s *Disc.* 2.9.20-21, the Stoic philosopher, Epictetus, also deals with the relevant question of what makes a “Jew”:

For how much better is it to set forth these principles than other schools of thought? Sit down now and give a philosophical discourse more effectively than Epicurus himself. Why, then do you call yourself a Stoic, why do you deceive the multitude, why do you act the part of a Jew, when you are Greek? (20) Do you not see in what sense men are severally called Jew, Syrian, or Egyptian? For example, whenever we see a man halting between two faiths, we are in the habit of saying, "He is not a Jew, he is only acting the part." But when he adopts the attitude of mind of the man who has been baptized and has made his choice, then he both is a Jew in fact and is also called one. (21) So we also are counterfeit "Baptists" ostensibly Jews, but in reality something else, not in sympathy with our own reason, far from applying the principles which we profess, yet priding ourselves upon them as being men who know them. (Oldfather)

Epictetus argues here that it is deceptive to assume the title of a Stoic philosopher but to not live fully as a Stoic. To emphasize this point, he suggests that this is akin

⁹⁰ Such a reading would necessitate, of course, that Petronius had at least decent familiarity with Judaism and Jewish communities.

taking the name of “Jew” while being a “Greek.” He goes on, moreover, to quote a phrase: “He is not a Jew but only acting the part.” Epictetus presents this phrase as though it referred to an individual who took on the title of a “Jew” and practiced certain aspects of Judaism but continued at the same time in another “faith,” still participating perhaps, for example, in the sacrifices of their native worship (Egyptian, Syrian). He seems to suggest, however, that the term “Jew” was commonly applied, not only to the specific case of those who took on the name of “Jew” but to any individual who was found to be “halting between two faiths.” This would imply that those who took on the title of “Jew” but continued in another faith were numerous or notable enough to serve as an exemplar of those “halting between two faiths.”

McEleney takes this passage as an indication that Hellenistic Jews, sensitive to the “extreme repugnance” to circumcision found in the Hellenistic world, were willing to “accept someone who refused circumcision as a convert to Judaism as a brother Jew, provided that in all things else he kept the ordinances and customs.”⁹¹ This possibility, however, is not supported from a reading of the text itself. Epictetus does not mention circumcision much less attitudes toward the rite. What the passage does seem to indicate is that baptism was considered by Epictetus to be a decisive rite in becoming a Jew, at least in name.

Nolland, however, suggests that Epictetus employs the example of baptism here in order to produce a “ formulation which is cast in terms which are general enough so that his reader is conscious that for “Jew” he may read “Syrian”, Egyptian,

⁹¹ McEleney, “Conversion,” 332.

etc...or indeed the adherent of any religion or philosophy.”⁹² Arguably, however, Epictetus refers to the rite of baptism precisely to illustrate the importance of individual decisiveness. To utilize the imagery of a rite that had general application but did not convey the concept of decisiveness in matters of identity would be unhelpful for Epictetus’ argument.

Of course, Epictetus could have simply been mistaken regarding the conversion process. Elsewhere though (in *Disc.* 1.22.4), he indicates knowledge of the particular Jewish attitude toward the eating of pork. In addition, it seems of note that he cites the phrase “He is not a Jew but only acting the part” as though it is a commonly used. It would seem to follow that he held baptism to be the commonly understood decisive element in taking at least the name of a Jew. Perhaps this was the case, at least, in the city in which Epictetus taught, that is, in Rome. It must be noted, however, that the important point for Epictetus is actually that while baptism might make one a Jew in name, adopting the mindset of one baptized makes one a Jew “in fact.” This, of course, leaves the role of circumcision unclear. It is possible that Epictetus considered circumcision to be unnecessary. Alternately, however, he understood circumcision to be necessary, whether undertaken prior to or following baptism but baptism to be the decisive rite.⁹³ Unfortunately, he does not provide sufficient information to be sure.

⁹² Nolland, “Uncircumcised?” 181.

⁹³ See also discussion in *GLAJJ* 1:543-544.

3.8 Tacitus

A passage from the writing of Tacitus is sometimes cited as support for the idea that circumcision was required in order to become a Jew. Closer examination of the text suggests, however, that it may, in fact, bolster the view that, at least perhaps in the city of Rome, circumcision was not an initial requirement but a rite taken later, at some point following conversion. The relevant portion from *Hist.* 5.1-2 is as follows:

Circumcidere genitalia instituerunt, ut diversitate noscantur. Transgressi in morem eorum idem usurpant, nec quidquam prius imbuuntur quam contemnere deos, exuere patriam, parentes liberos fraters vilia habere.

They instituted circumcision of their genitals in order to be known by this distinction. Those who have crossed over to their customs [manners/ways/laws] take up circumcision and, prior to anything, are instructed (*imbuuntur*) to despise the gods, cast aside their fatherland and to hold their parents, children, and brothers as of little worth.

If “those who have crossed over” is understood here to mean “those who have converted,” it would suggest, critically, that Tacitus assumed that individuals became circumcised *after* and not prior to conversion. In other words, one “crosses over” (to the Jewish side) by taking up the manners, customs or laws (*morem*) of the Jews. The singular event of circumcision comes later.

As mentioned, some scholars take this passage as evidence that circumcision was a necessary element of conversion.⁹⁴ Such a view may be based on specific translations of the passage, such, for example as that of C.H. Moore:

They adopted circumcision to distinguish themselves from other peoples by this difference. Those who are converted to their ways follow the same practice, and the earliest lesson they receive is to despise the gods, to disown their country, and to regard their parents, children, and brothers as of little account.⁹⁵

As may be noticed, Moore renders Tacitus' statement as, "Those who are converted to their ways follow the same practice" (*Transgressi in morem euorem idem usurpant*). This particular rendering may convey, however, the impression that circumcision is practiced *in order* to convert. The use of the perfect passive participle, *transgressi*, here, however, would seem to indicate a completed action in the past.⁹⁶ Thus, it may be argued that Tacitus is not suggesting here that those who wish to convert or are in the process of converting become circumcised, but that those who have *already* "converted" subsequently "follow" the practice of circumcision or, alternatively rendered, those who have "crossed over" (*transgressi*)

⁹⁴ For the view that Tacitus suggests in this passage that circumcision effects or is one the elements which effects conversion see, for example: Cohen, *Beginnings*, 158 and Schäfer, *Judeophobia*, 98.

⁹⁵ In *GLAJJ* 2:26-7.

⁹⁶ See also Tacitus' use of *transgressi* in *Germ.* 2.5: *quoniam qui primi Rhenum transgressi Gallos expulerint ac nunc Tungri, tunc Germani vocati sint* ("since those who first crossed (*transgressi*) the Rhine drove out the Gauls, and now are called Tungri, but then were called Germans").

“adopt” or “take up” (*usurpant*) circumcision. Circumcision, in other words, is performed *after* conversion.

In addition, as may be seen above, Tacitus also suggests that the first lessons that those who follow the Jew receive is to “despise the gods, to disown their country, and to regard their parents, children, and brothers as of little account.” This seems to be parallel to Philo’s description of the “incomer” – that is, of one who forsakes idols and leaves their family and homeland in order to follow the God of the Israelites.⁹⁷ Moreover, as argued above, it seems that, for Philo, these are the first steps taken by the “incomer”- not circumcision.⁹⁸ It is worth noting, of course, that Tacitus does not always demonstrate the best knowledge of Judaism. In terms of the matter of circumcision, however, and considering the similarity with what is said by Philo, his statements might be taken as indicative of actual practice.⁹⁹

⁹⁷ *Spec.* 4.178.

⁹⁸ It might be noted, moreover, that *imbuuntur* (the term translated as “instructed” above), has the primary meaning of “to wet, moisten, dip, etc...” (See entry for *imbuo*- in LSJ). It is thus tempting to see some reference to baptism in usage of the term. The sense of being steeped in a certain doctrine or way of thinking, however, would comport with Tacitus’ own usage elsewhere (see Tac. *Dial.* 29).

⁹⁹ *Spec.* 4.178.

3.9 Summary

As has been argued, there were a variety of positions in the first century regarding the place of circumcision in “becoming a Jew.” Although some sources are indeterminate, the positions may be generally catalogued as follows:

1) Circumcision is a step in the process, a requirement or the singular means by which one becomes one with the people of Jacob/Israel or becomes a Jew:

Sons of Jacob/the men of Schechem (Gen 34, epic of Theodotus (*Praep. ev.* 9.22.4-6); Gentiles under Queen Esther? (LXX Esth 8:17); Achior (LXX Jdt 14:10); Philo’s treatment of circumcision as a preface to the *Spec.*; Aristobulus I/the Itureans (Josephus, *A.J.* 13.119), John Hyrcanus/Idumaeans (Josephus, *A.J.* 13.257-8); Ananias (initial position)/King Izates (Josephus, *A.J.* 20.17-96); King Agrippa /Azizus, King of Emesa (Josephus, *A.J.* 20.139); Berenice requires Polemo to become circumcised (Josephus, *A.J.* 20.145-6); The Idumaeans (Ptolemy the Historian); A “Jew” in Non-Greek cities (Petronius, *Frag.* 37)

2) Circumcision is necessary to become a Jew but may be overlooked in cases of serious or mortal danger:

Ananias (2nd position), (Helena?) (Josephus, *A.J.* 20.17-96)

3) Circumcision is not necessary to become a Jew but is required, expected or taken at a later point:

Philo (*Migr.* 92-93 and *QE* 2:2); A Jew in Non-Greek cities (Petronius, *Frag.* 37); Metilius? (Josephus, *B.J.* 2.454); Eleazar (Josephus, *A.J.* 20.17-96); “those who are converted to their ways” (Tacitus, *Hist.* 5.1-2)

4) Baptism (rather than circumcision) is the *decisive* step in becoming a Jew
Epictetus (*Disc.* 2, 9:20-21), (Tacitus?)

5) Circumcision is not necessary or is optional in becoming a Jew:

Extreme allegorizers (Philo, *Migr.* 92-93); Metilius? (Josephus, *B.J.* 2.454); a Jew in Greek cities (Petronius, *Frag.* 37)

6) The of renunciation of idolatry is what makes one a “Jew” (at least in the eyes of outsiders)
Bel. (Tacitus)

7) The sons of Abraham are required to be physically circumcised but it is not possible to be considered part of the “holy seed” without 8th day

circumcision and descent from Jacob (It is not, therefore, possible to “become a Jew”)

Jub. 15.11-5, 30-1; 16.17-9

As may be seen, in the first and early second century CE, there was not a monolithic position but, rather, a spectrum of views regarding the question of whether or not circumcision served as a decisive rite in becoming a Jew.

A critical question, however, is how were these views actually reflected in practice? This question is admittedly difficult to assess. As previously mentioned, while Cohen notes that Philo of Alexandria seems to have considered it possible to acquire “membership in the Israelite polity” prior to becoming physically circumcised¹⁰⁰ he yet concludes that “as far as is known no Jewish community in antiquity (including Philo’s accepted as members male proselytes who were not circumcised”). Again, Cohen understands Philo to be expressing a particular theological perspective that lacked any practical social consequence in terms of membership in actual Jewish communities.¹⁰¹

Similarly, Goodman suggests that Philo’s mention of “extreme allegorizers” describes a “small group of Jews.” While this is possible, Goodman, however, does not provide rationale as to the reason for this characterization.¹⁰² Philo, himself, of course, was a significant figure in the Jewish community. That his writings might thus be preserved is understandable. This, however does not mean that others,

¹⁰⁰ Shaye D. Cohen, *The Beginnings of Jewishness: Boundaries, Varieties, Uncertainties* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), 157.

¹⁰¹ Cohen, *Beginnings*, 158. Cohen states “Theological conversion was not social conversion.” See Cohen, *Beginnings*, 152.

¹⁰² Goodman, *Mission*, 67. In terms of the matter of numbers, Goodman himself points out the difficulty in population assessments due to scant and unreliable evidence.

whose writings are not available or no longer extant, were of no note at the time.

Philo, himself, states above that there are “some” (τινες) (rather than “a few”) who shared this allegorical view of circumcision.

Petronius’ observations on circumcision, however, in conjunction with Josephus’ mention of Metilius, warrant consideration of the possibility that circumcision was, in fact, not always required in “Greek” cities or in Rome. This coheres with Epictetus’ seeming suggestion that baptism was the decisive rite in becoming a Jew, perhaps among those in Rome. Of course, it is possible that these were marginal or ill-informed perspectives. Taken together, however, with Philo’s allegorizers they may well indicate a view that had practical implication in Paul’s day. Particularly in terms of evaluation of the diaspora context then, it is worth considering then the possibility that an individual might have “become a Jew” without circumcision. Meanwhile, the texts of Petronius again along with that of Tacitus, seem to bolster the case that Philo’s own view of circumcision as eventually necessary but not the defining act of conversion was not marginal or without social support.

4. Following in the Footsteps of Abraham: Abraham as an Exemplar of and for the Proselyte

As will be discussed in the next chapter, Paul in Romans points to the figure of Abraham for his argument regarding the Gentiles, the law and the practice of circumcision. In order to place Paul's appeal to Abraham in better historical relief, this section will explore the ways in which Philo of Alexandria presents Abraham as an exemplar both of and for the proselyte. As will be seen, Philo emphasizes Abraham's perception of the divine and presents the forefather as an example of an "unwritten law." Philo's use of the figure of Abraham in relation to these concepts Moreover, the ways in which Philo describes the proselyte, mirror his description of Abraham. As will be reviewed here, Philo portrays both Abraham and the proselyte as one who 1) perceives the one true God and leaves polytheism or fables 2) moves from darkness to light 3) journeys away from homeland and family 4) observes the divine law and exercises virtue.

4.1 The Aim and the Path of the Wise Man - Abraham "Does" the Law and Follows the Steps of the Lord

In *Migr. Abr.* 130-131 Philo presents Abraham as a "good man" who did the law and followed in the steps of the Lord:

so the good man does everything blamelessly keeping straight the path of life, so that the actions of the wise man are nothing else than the words of God. So in another place He says, "Abraham did 'all my law'" (Gen. xxvi. 5): "Law" being evidently nothing else than the Divine word enjoining what we should do, as Moses testifies by saying "he received a law from His words" (Deut xxxiii. 3f.). If, then, the law is a Divine word, and the man of true worth

"does" the law, he assuredly "does" the word: so that, as I said God's words are the wise man's doings." To follow God is, then, according to Moses, that most holy man, our aim and object (τέλος), as he says elsewhere too, "thou shalt go in the steps of the Lord thy God" (Deut. xiii. 4). (Colson)

According to Gen 26:5 Abraham obeyed God's voice, injunctions, commandments, ordinances and statutes (ἀνθ' ὧν ὑπήκουσεν Ἀβραάμ ὁ πατήρ σου τῆς ἐμῆς φωνῆς καὶ ἐφύλαξεν τὰ προστάγματά μου καὶ τὰς ἐντολάς μου καὶ τὰ δικαιώματά μου καὶ τὰ νόμιμά μου). What is significant about this, of course, is that this would seem to suggest that there was a system of law (including specific distinctions in types of law) that long preceded the law given to and committed to writing by Moses. Philo specifically cites Gen 26:5. He also quotes from Deut 33:3, pointing out that Moses himself testified that Abraham did the law. Drawing on Deut 13: 4, Philo further equates the idea of doing the law with walking or going in the "steps" of the Lord. He thus suggests, in effect, that Abraham walked in the steps of the Lord by keeping his law. This is, in Philo's view, according to Moses, the chief aim and object of the man of worth.

4.2 Abraham was "Himself a Law and an Unwritten Statute"

At the conclusion of *Abr* 46.275, Philo describes Abraham as follows:

So much for all this, but to these praises of the Sage, so many and so great, Moses adds this crowning saying "that this man did the divine law and the divine commands." He did them, not taught by written words, but unwritten nature gave him the zeal to follow where wholesome and untainted impulse led him. And when they have God's promises before them what should men do but trust in them most firmly? Such was the life of the first, the founder of the nation, one who obeyed the law, some will say, but rather as our discourse has shown, *himself a law an unwritten statute*.

Here, Philo describes Abraham as "himself a law and an unwritten statute." Again this does not mean that Abraham followed his own law but rather that he followed the "divine law" through an internal "impulse."

This notion of an "unwritten law" is not restricted to Philo. In terms of Jewish literature, a similar view to that of Philo may be found in 2 Baruch 641-644:

And after these you saw the bright waters; that is the fountain of Abraham and his generation, and the coming of his son, and the son of his son, and of those who are like them. For at that time the unwritten law was in force among them and the works of the commandments were accomplished at that time, and the belief in the coming judgment was brought about, and the hope of the world which will be renewed was built at that time, and the promise of the life that will come later was planted. Those are the bright waters which you have seen. (Klijn)

As may be seen, 2 Baruch likewise presents the notion of an "unwritten law" present during the time of Abraham and his sons. The text suggests, moreover, that the "works of the commandments" were accomplished at the time. Although the "works of the commandments" is not explicitly defined here, it may perhaps refer to the "works" or "deeds" performed in obedience to the commandments specified in the later written or Mosaic law.

4.3 Abraham as Exemplar of and for the Proselyte

In his treatise *On the Virtues* (*Virt.*), Philo also suggests that Abraham had been a Chaldean astrologer but perceived “the One...Maker of All” (*Virt.* 213-216):¹⁰³

The most ancient member of the Jewish nation was a Chaldean by birth, the son of an astrologer, one of those who study the lore of that science, and think that the stars and the whole heaven and universe are gods, the authors, they say, of the events which befall each man for good or for ill, and hold that there is no originating cause outside the things we perceive by our senses. What could be more grievous or more capable of proving that total absence of nobility in the soul than this, that its knowledge of the may, the secondary, the created, only leads it to ignore the One, the Primal, the Uncreated and Maker of all. Perception of these truths and divine inspiration induced him to leave his native country, his race and paternal home, knowing that if he stayed the delusions of the polytheistic creed would stay within him and render it impossible for him to discover the One...And therefore he is the first person spoken of as believing in God, since he first grasped a firm and unswerving conception of the truth that there is one Cause above all. (Colson)

Similarly, in *Abr.* 70, Philo suggests that Abraham at first accepted the astrological system of the Chaldeans but then:

opening the soul’s eye as though after a profound sleep, and beginning to see the pure beam instead of deep darkness, he followed that ray and discerned what he had not held before, a charioteer and pilot presiding over the world. (Colson)

¹⁰³ See also Josephus, *A.J.* 1.154-5

This “charioteer and pilot” is, of course, the God of the universe who Abraham, perceived by following a “pure beam” or “ray” (of light). Philo describes this journey allegorically as the “mind’s migration” (*Abr.* 17.77-78) from astrology and the Chaldean creed to an apprehension of God. In other words, Philo understands the biblical account of Abraham’s migration (*Gen.* 12:1) from Chaldea allegorically as a migration of the mind.

In a similar fashion, Philo describes Tamar, as one who left idolatry for the One God (*Virt.* 221):

Tamar was a woman from Palestinian Syria, bred in a house and city which acknowledged a multitude of gods and was full of images and wooden busts and idols in general. But when passing, as it were, from profound darkness she was able to glimpse a little ray of truth, she deserted to the camp of piety at the risk of her life, caring little for its preservation, if it were not to be a good life. This good life she held to mean nothing else than to be the servant and suppliant of the one great Cause.

As mentioned, Philo suggests that Abraham, in discerning God, had followed a “ray.” Here he similarly presents Tamar as having glimpsed a “ray,” in this case specifying “a ray of truth.”¹⁰⁴ In response, he claims she “deserts to the camp of piety.” That is, she leaves her former place and goes over to the side of “piety.” Elsewhere, Philo similarly describes the proselyte or incomer as those who “have taken a journey to a

¹⁰⁴ See also *Deus* 46.136-7.

better home from idle fables to a clear vision of the truth" (*Virt.* 20.102).¹⁰⁵ In these respective descriptions of Abraham, Tamar and the proselyte, Philo suggests a migration or movement away from darkness or obscurity to light and clarity.

The idea of migration to another place is echoed in on in *Virt.* 217-219. There Philo presents Abraham as:

the standard of nobility for all proselytes, who, abandoning the ignobility of strange laws and monstrous customs which assigned divine honors to stocks and stones and soulless things in general, have come to settle in a better land, in a commonwealth full of true life and vitality, with truth as its director and president.

Here he suggests that Abraham leaves for "a better land" and "commonwealth" which has "truth" as its director. He similarly describes proselytes as those who have "left their country, their friends, and kinfolk for the sake of virtue and holiness" (*Spec.* 1, 9, 52).¹⁰⁶ Thus, both Abraham and the proselyte are noted for recognizing God and forsaking their kindred and homeland for the sake of truth or virtue and holiness.

¹⁰⁵ See Harry Austryn Wolfson, *Philo: Foundations of Religious Philosophy in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam*, vol. 2 (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1947), 356, n.234. See also *Spec.* 4.34, 178.

¹⁰⁶ Noted by Wolfson, *Philo*, 357 n. 240.

Philo also specifically describes the proselyte as one who 'has come over to God of his own accord.'" (*De Praem.* 26.152).¹⁰⁷ In this, Abraham may be interpreted as an exemplar of the proselyte. In *Abr.* 1.6, for example, Philo, presumably speaking of Abraham and the other patriarchs, suggests that they had no human teachers:

For they were not scholars of pupils of others, nor did they learn under teachers what was right to say or do

This seems to have been the case too with Tamar who came over to the one true God of her own accord. Indeed in *Abr* 16.75, Philo acknowledges that this possibility is open to "anyone." He writes:

Anyone who reflects on these things and learns from no distant source but from one near at hand, namely himself and what makes him what he is, will know for certain that the world is not the primal God but work of the primal God

Thus, some proselytes, for Philo, are similar to Abraham then in that they apprehend God on their own.

On the other hand, Abraham is also presented as having the power to influence or set an example for the behavior of others. As may be seen in the earlier

¹⁰⁷ Wolfson's translation seems to highlight the sense of *automolasai* more so than that of Colson.

quote from *Virt.* 217-219, Abraham is the “standard of nobility for all proselytes.”

That is, he provides for them an example to which to aspire.

Furthermore, although Philo seems to highlight the idea of the proselyte’s self-apprehension of God, he also suggests that it is necessary for some to begin with human teaching. In *Who is the Heir* 19 we find the following:

Now the wise men take God for their guide and teacher, but the less perfect take the wise man.

Philo repeatedly refers to Abraham as a “wise man.”¹⁰⁸ He suggests moreover, that Abraham’s influence continues to extend beyond his own lifetime for, along with those of the other patriarchs, his virtue as recorded in the scriptures serves as an encouragement to others to also live virtuous lives (*Abr.* 1.4):

These are such men as lived good and blameless lives, whose virtues stand permanently recorded in the most holy scriptures, not merely to sound their praises but for the instruction of the reader as an inducement to him to aspire the same.

It may be then that while Philo admits to Abraham’s influence on the behavior of others and one whose life may be used as a pointer to God, Philo’s Abraham does not actively convert others to his own faith. He does not seek followers but rather is

¹⁰⁸ See for example, *Cher.* 7; *Abr.* 109, 118, 272.

sought by followers. In a sense, Philo's Abraham, by nature of his virtue, cannot help being a leader and an example. Thus in his extra-biblical account of Genesis 23, Philo presents the residents of Hebron as having been impressed with the way in which Abraham mourned for Sarah, we find the following (*Abr.* 38.260):

Then as the greatness and glory of his virtues in all its pre-eminence were more than they could keep to themselves, they approached him and exclaimed: Thou art a king from God among us.

As may be seen, Philo suggests that the residents of Hebron were drawn to Abraham because of his virtues to the extent that they could not refrain from publically declaring him "a king from God" among them.

The themes of the proselyte, unwritten law¹⁰⁹ and exemplar are far more extensive in the work of Philo than may be covered here. It is hoped, however that the present treatment has provided a sufficient sketch to reveal, in particular, the close connection made by Philo between Abraham and the proselyte.

¹⁰⁹ For further discussion on this topic, see John W. Martens, *One God, One Law: Philo of Alexandria on the Mosaic and Greco-Roman Law* (Boston: Brill, 2003).

4.4 Abraham as Exemplar for the Proselyte in *Genesis Rabbah*

It might be also noted that the idea of Abraham as an exemplar for the proselyte is also evident in rabbinic literature. One example is found in the earliest exegetical midrash *Genesis Rabbah*.¹¹⁰ In chapter 46.2, the following question is raised as to why Abraham was circumcised at the age of 99:

Why should he not have circumcised himself at the age of forty-eight, when he recognized his Creator? In order not to discourage the proselytes. (Lit. 'so as not to shut the door in the face of proselytes'). (Freedman)

As may be seen the reason that Abraham was circumcised at 99 was so that he would not discourage the proselyte. The idea is that even if one was quite old and the eighth day had long since passed, a man might consider the example of Abraham and not be afraid or think it was far too late to become physically circumcised.

5. General Summary

Three main points may be gathered from this chapter. First, there were a variety of reasons why a man drawn to the gospel might have been reluctant to become circumcised. Second, there was a spectrum of views regarding the requirement of circumcision in becoming a Jew. These ranged from not requiring physical circumcision at all, to requiring the rite, though not immediately, to requiring it as the decisive rite in conversion. Finally, as may be noted from the writings of Philo, Abraham, the patriarch was considered an exemplar both of and

¹¹⁰ On the dating of *Gen Rab* see Str-B 2:279-80.

for the proselyte. Based particularly upon a reading of Gen 26:5 together with Gen 17:1, Philo seems to have understood Abraham to have followed in the footsteps of the Lord and to have performed all the law of God. It is hoped that having a sense, particularly of the attitudes toward circumcision found in the Greek and Latin sources as well as the spectrum of views regarding circumcision in Judaism will be useful in reading Paul's epistle to the Romans in context.

Chapter 3

Rereading Paul on the Topic of Circumcision in Romans

1. Introduction

As discussed in the previous chapter, extant sources seem to indicate that, during the first century CE, diverse views were held regarding the question of the necessity of physical circumcision in “becoming a Jew.” Thus, for example, the “extreme allegorizers” mentioned by Philo seem to have discounted the need for the physical rite altogether. Others, meanwhile, expected circumcision to be performed. Among this latter group, some considered circumcision to serve as the actual means by which one became a Jew while others deemed performance of rite a matter of obedience to the law for those who had *already* become Jews.

In addition, as discussed, Philo describes the proselyte in a fashion similar to the way in which he describes Abraham; that is, as one who perceives God and forsakes his or her previous ways to follow the steps of the divine path. In this chapter, a case will be offered that Paul, as with Philo, points to Abraham as an exemplar both of and for the proselyte. It will be suggested moreover that, as with Philo and fellow Jews of his time period, Paul treats circumcision as a rite that *ought* to be observed – though, critically, not as the decisive factor in “becoming a Jew.”

Paul’s particular discourse in Romans concerning circumcision is actually embedded in a larger argument that deals with the question of the way in which an individual might be considered righteous before God. It is likewise integrated with the question of the relationship between Jews and Gentiles and their respective and mutual relationships to God.

In Romans, Paul seems to alternately tip two sides of a balance up and then down – indicating at one moment, the Jews to have some advantage and then, at another, the Gentiles; but, ultimately, showing the two sides to be equal. It may be argued, moreover, that the apex of this equalizing strategy, at least in the first few chapters of the epistle, occurs in Rom 4:11-12, that is, in the verses in which he explains the actual purpose of physical circumcision.

The following sections will trace the contours of Paul's argument in the first four chapters of Romans. As will be seen, the apostle begins with an introduction and personal address to his audience. He then moves from a general indictment of the wicked to a more particular indictment of the hypocrite, to an even more particular indictment of an individual who calls himself a Jew, boasts in God and teaches others to keep the law while, in fact, hypocritically, breaking the law himself. He further argues that the true Jew is one who actually does the law, even if he does not have or know the written law, and that true circumcision is of the heart.

Following this, however, Paul actually affirms and explains the advantage of the Jew and of physical circumcision. Regarding the latter, he makes a case, in verses 4:11-12, that the forefather of the Jews, that is, Abraham, through faith along with the very act of circumcision itself, actually became the father of both Jews and Gentiles alike. As will be argued, physical circumcision is, for Paul, a sign applicable to both groups since it signifies something crucial and common to both; namely, the righteousness that is produced by faith in God alone. Moreover, according to Paul, it is through faith that both Jews and Gentiles become inheritors of the blessing given to their mutual forefather, Abraham.

It must be noted, however, that some, such as Stowers¹ understand Paul to have been addressing the Gentiles. In this reading, Paul presents himself primarily as an apostle to the Gentiles, initially commending Gentile faith. He goes on from there, however, to condemn Gentile idolatry and sexual immorality and then to critique the Gentile hypocrite and only afterward to indict the Jewish teacher.

There is merit to this understanding of the progression of chapters 1-2. Paul, however, does not seem to exclude Jewish hearers or readers but rather to be taking advantage of the elasticity of the term ἔθνησιν (which may be taken to mean “nations” or “Gentiles”) and particular perceptions of self and other in order to achieve his purposes. In other words, at various junctures, the text might actually be read in more than one way. The particular fashion in which Paul was understood would have depended upon the individual reader or hearer – and the degree to which their own respective sense of identity as a Jew or Gentile may have been at the forefront over a more basic self-identification as a human being. In this way, the reader or hearer would have been met where they were but still brought along to the ultimate point to which Paul desired to lead them – that is, to a more humble sense of self and acceptance of the obedience of faith.

¹ Stowers, *Romans*, 83-125. It may be noted that there has been a general shift in scholarly opinion regarding the demographics of the community in Rome from the view that it was predominantly Jewish to the view that it was predominantly Gentile. For discussion see Jewett, *Romans*, 70.

2. Chapter 1

2.1 Paul's Introduction, General Purpose and Mission

Paul opens his epistle to the Romans with a robust personal introduction (1:1) and declaration, later in verse 5, of the apostolic task:

5 ...ἐλάβομεν χάριν καὶ ἀποστολὴν εἰς ὑπακοὴν πίστεως ἐν πᾶσιν τοῖς ἔθνεσιν ὑπὲρ τοῦ ὀνόματος αὐτοῦ,

5 ... we have received grace and apostleship to bring about the obedience of faith among all the nations (or "Gentiles" - ἔθνεσιν) for the sake of his name.

On the one hand, Paul's somewhat abrupt switch to the third person plural in verse 5 may have been understood as an epistolary use of the first person,² as an attempt to soften the boldness of his personal introduction in verse 1 and claim to such an impressive span of ministry. In other words, he might be understood here as speaking solely of his own mission. Since, moreover, Paul mentions in Gal 2:9 that he was sent to the Gentiles (τὰ ἔθνη) as opposed to the circumcision (τὴν περιτομήν)³ and specifically self-identifies later in the Romans (11:13) as an ἐθνῶν ἀπόστολος ("apostle of the Gentiles") in a context in which it is more apparent that the term ἐθνῶν refers specifically to the Gentiles, he may be understood here as declaring his task to bring about the obedience of faith among all the "Gentiles."

It may be noted, however, that the community in Rome is one that Paul himself did not found nor, at this juncture, had even visited. Later in the epistle,

² This is, for example, is the reading of Cranfield, *Romans 1-8*, 65.

³ See also Cranfield, *Romans 1-8*, 67. Note, in addition, Rom 15:16.

Paul himself specifically notes his desire to avoid preaching in locales already serviced by other lest he build on the foundation of another (15:17-21). Thus, while confidently asserting his own divine calling (in verse 1), he seems to use the third person in verse 5 in order to acknowledge the placement of his ministry within the wider context of a corporate apostolic work that was universal in scope – that is, to “all the nations.”

Paul then goes on to formally greet his audience (1:7), specifically mentioning that the faith of those in Rome is universally proclaimed (1:8). In verses 8-12, he also highlights, however, his own spiritual gifting suggesting the possibility of mutual encouragement through his own faith and that of the Roman community.

In verse 14, he further claims to be a debtor to preach the gospel to both “the Greeks and the Barbarians;⁴ to the wise as well as the foolish.” For those who might have understood Paul as referring earlier to the Gentiles, Paul’s reference here to the “Greeks and Barbarians” would be taken as a reference to all Gentile nations, whether Greek or Barbarian.

It must be noted, however, that the phrase “Greeks and Barbarians” was utilized broadly as a way of describing the entire world, including the Jews. Thus, Philo and Josephus while, on the one hand, recognizing the Jewish people as being distinct from all other nations, also specifically include the Jews among the non-Greek, “Barbarian” nations (such as Egypt, Persia and Babylon).⁵ With this in mind,

⁴ “Barbarian” is here capitalized in parity with “Greek.”

⁵ See, for example, Philo *Mos.* 2.25-27 and Josephus *C. Ap.* 2.148. For more on the use of the term “barbarian” see Stamenka Emilova Antonova, “Barbarian or Greek? The Charge of Barbarism and Early Christian Apologetic” (PhD diss., Columbia University, 2005).

it may be suggested that, though describing himself, on the one hand, as an apostle to the Gentiles and though ministering for the most part geographic territory inhabited primarily by the Gentiles, Paul, in using the phrase “Greeks and Barbarians,” is actually presenting himself as being a debtor to those of all nations.⁶ (Thus, later in the epistle, he will explain that he, in fact, magnifies his ministry to the Gentiles in order to win those among his own people by provoking them to jealousy.)⁷

Yet, despite the seemingly egalitarian sense, Paul’s placement of the categories of the “wise and foolish” adjacent to the categories of the “Greeks and Barbarians” would have flagged a prominent difference in opinion if not outright rivalry between the two groups regarding matters of knowledge and wisdom.

Diogenes Laërtius, for example, in his introduction to the *Lives of the Eminent Philosophers*, asserts that philosophy originated with the Greeks and not with the Barbarians. Meanwhile, Josephus claims that the Greek philosophers actually derived ideas from and followed after Moses.⁸ A Greek might thus have understood Paul to be setting up the categories in parallel order (Greek = wise, Barbarian = foolish), while a Barbarian, on the other hand, might have understood an inverse alignment between the categories (Barbarian = wise, Greek = foolish). In other

⁶ On the educational front, Paul himself was, of course, indebted to both Greek and Jewish training.

⁷ He seems to use this tactic of magnification in the letter itself, seemingly to heighten the sense of Gentile Jewish rivalry. The idea might be to bring out what, though overt to some extent, might still remain latent in order to finally diffuse it.

⁸ See, for example, *C. Ap.* 2.168, 257 and 281. Josephus expresses surprise that work of Greek historians should be preferred to those of the Barbarians since those among the latter had far more ancient records (*C. Ap.* 1.6). He also critiques Greek historians throughout *C. Ap.*, highlighting points in their works that he deems inaccurate and/or contradictory.

words, in Paul's world, the corporate designation of the "wise" and the "foolish" may have shifted according to the determination of those doing the labeling.

Paul, however, while acknowledging the typical bifurcation of the world into "Greek" and "Barbarian" seems actually to be highlighting this rivalry only to subsequently destroy it. He will ultimately argue that those who are "wise" and those who are "foolish" are, respectively, individuals who obey or disobey God whether of the Greek or of the Barbarian nations. The "wise" thus, in Paul's view are not the members of the Greek or the Barbarian nations *per se* but rather, those within both groups who possess the "obedience of faith."⁹

Having mentioned his indebtedness to the Greek and the Barbarian, Paul goes on to state the following:

16 Οὐ γὰρ ἐπαισχύνομαι τὸ εὐαγγέλιον^τ, δύναμις γὰρ θεοῦ ἐστὶν ^πεἰς σωτηρίαν^ν παντὶ τῷ πιστεύοντι, Ἰουδαίῳ τε ^οπρῶτον καὶ Ἑλληνι.
17 δικαιοσύνη γὰρ θεοῦ ἐν αὐτῷ ἀποκαλύπτεται ἐκ πίστεως εἰ πίστιν, καθὼς γέγραπται· ὁ δὲ δίκαιος ^τ ἐκ πίστεως ζήσεται.

16 For I am not ashamed of the gospel; for it is the power of God unto salvation to all those having faith, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. 17 For in it, the righteousness of God is revealed through faith unto faith; as it is written, "But the righteous out of faith shall live."

⁹ Philo makes the same claim regarding those who practice wisdom among the Greeks and Barbarians. See Philo *Spec.* 2.44-48.

Whereas he had named the “Greeks” and the “Barbarians” in verse 14, Paul now, in verse 16, refers more specifically to the “Jew” and the “Greek.” As noted by Dunn, this is a more Jewish way of dividing the world.¹⁰ Also, having mentioned that he was set apart for the gospel (1:1) and that the divinely ordained apostolic mission was to bring about the “obedience of faith for the sake of his name among all nations” (1:5), Paul further adds that this gospel is “the power of God unto salvation to all those having faith.”

The word “all” points, of course, to a level field of access. Yet in the very next clause, Paul raises a specter of seeming inequality between the Jew and the Greek by suggesting that the gospel is “to the Jew first.” He counters this, however, in verse 17 by quoting Hab 2:4 (“But the righteous out of faith shall live”), thereby highlighting the critical factor that places both Jew and Greek on the very same footing – that is, faith.

2.2 A General Indictment of the Wicked

2.2.1 An Indictment on the Basis of the Witness from Creation

Following these positive notes, however, and through the remainder of the chapter (verses 18-32), Paul launches into an indictment of men and women for not honoring God who may be clearly perceived through creation. He claims that despite their knowledge of God they did not honor God and that, in doing so, their “foolish hearts were darkened” (verse 21) and thus, “claiming to be wise they became fools” (verse 22). They exchanged the glory of God for images and worshipped the

¹⁰ See Dunn, *Romans*, 40.

creature rather than the creator. God, therefore, handed them over to the “desires of their hearts” and thus to shameless acts and improper conduct (verses 24-32). Paul then further explains the type of “shameless acts and “improper conduct” committed, describing various forms of lust, impurity and idolatry.

Of course, given the initial charges of idolatry and homosexuality in verses 21-27, sins considered characteristic of the Gentiles, Paul may have been understood in this section as dealing specifically with the Gentiles.¹¹ Thus, those in his audience who had understood his initial address as being primarily for the Gentiles, relishing perhaps in the commendation of their faith might, at this point, be feeling a little less proud of their Gentile heritage. A Jew, meanwhile, who may have felt, initially somewhat left out of Paul’s address, might now feel more affirmed.

Paul, however, may be understood here as casting a more general indictment. In 1:18 he uses the general term ἀνθρώπων. Moreover, the charges he makes might be understood to apply to the Jew just as to the Gentile. The Israelites, after all, are chastised throughout the Old Testament for their participation in idolatry.¹² The sin of the golden calf, for example, certainly comes to mind.¹³ The mention of “reptiles” in verse 23 also recalls MT Ezek. 8:10, a verse which mentions the “reptiles” and hidden “idols” of the elders of Israel discovered by the prophet through a hole in the

¹¹ For this reading, see, for example, Ernst Käsemann, *Commentary on Romans* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1980), 36-52. and C.K. Barrett *The Epistle to the Romans* (London: Adam and Charles Black, 1957), 32-40. Fitzmeyer specifies “pagans” (*Romans* 269-295).

¹² See, for example, the reference to sexual immorality and idolatry with regard to Baal Peor in Num 25:1-2. Paul’s discussion in Rom 1:18-32 shares some similar elements with Stephen’s speech Acts 7:41-43.

¹³ Indeed, as noted by Dunn, some of Paul’s phrasing is similar here to Ps. 106, psalm that specifically mentions that episode. See Dunn, *Romans*, 61.

wall of the entrance to the Temple court. Moreover, later, in Rom 11:4, Paul specifically references 1 Kings 19:18, a verse which implies the worship of “Baal” by a majority of Israelites. He employs the verse as an analogy suggesting that those in his own time period were akin to the ancient Israelites who, in a state of blindness and unbelief, bowed their knee to the image of Baal.

Also, in terms of homosexuality, attitudes among Jews across the empire may have been varied and, in any case, prevailing mores would not always have corresponded with actual behavior. As mentioned earlier, Martial, in *Epigr.* 7.55 suggests, albeit in the context of satire and literary construct, engagement in pederastic activity by a man from Jerusalem (*Solymis*).¹⁴ Though Jews to some degree or even in majority, particularly perhaps in certain locations (such as Jerusalem and Judea), may have disapproved of lesbianism and homosexuality, this certainly does not mean that there was no such practice among them.

Finally, in 1:29-30, Paul lists, in, various types of unrighteousness (“envy, murder, strife, deceit, etc....”) that would apply equally to both Jews and Gentiles. He thus, is not necessarily singling out the Gentiles but, rather, is speaking of the wicked among humanity, whether Jews or Gentiles,¹⁵ from the past up until the present time.

Moreover, as may be recalled from the previous chapter, Philo highlights Abraham as an example of the “wise” man, suggesting that the patriarch had adduced the existence of God from creation (*Virt.* 212-214). He likewise points out that other men and women were able to move away from idolatry and perceive God

¹⁴ See also *Epigr.* 11.94.

¹⁵ See also discussion by Jewett in *Romans*, 152-3.

(*Virt.* 220). He specifically describes, moreover, the movement of both Abraham and Tamar (*Virt.* 221) away from idolatry as a journey from darkness to light. Paul's particular description of the darkening of the heart in these latter verses of chapter 1 seem thus to represent a kind of inversion of Philo's description of Abraham and the proselyte.

2.2.2 An Indictment of the Basis of the Knowledge of God's Decree

The final verse of chapter 1, verse 32, is of particular note. Paul suggests there that those who commit offenses against God do so despite their knowledge of God's decree (τὸ δικάσιμα τοῦ θεοῦ), that is, specifically, the penalty of death for transgression. This position seems to flow from the point he has just made; namely, that the knowledge of God is evident from creation. In other words, what Paul seems to be suggesting is that, due to or, perhaps, along with the universal knowledge of God there is also a universal understanding of "God's decree," the death penalty. Since, moreover, the notion of a transgression implies a definition of wrongdoing, what Paul seems to be also intimating is that there exists an unwritten universal law. Paul's conception of universal law is not one that is entirely disconnected, however, from the Mosaic law.¹⁶ Rather, as will be discussed further on, Paul seems to understand the universal law to be encapsulated in the Decalogue and possible to perform, even by those who might not know its written expression, namely, the Mosaic law.

¹⁶ Cf. discussion by Stowers, *Rereading*, 112.

3. Chapter 2

3.1 A Specific Indictment of the Hypocrite

Having made this more general indictment of the wicked in chapter 1, Paul then, at the beginning of chapter 2, brings the discussion to a more individual level. Having already made the case that all are without excuse (1:20) he turns, seemingly, to address a single individual: "Therefore you are without excuse, Oh man." What Paul seems to be suggesting is that, inasmuch as the knowledge and decree of God is evident to all and all are thus without excuse, this "man" ("human being," "person" or "individual") too is, therefore, also without excuse (2:1). Paul charges this "man" essentially of hypocrisy. That is, he charges him of judging others while doing the same very things of which he accuses them himself. Paul sternly warns however, that those who judge others will, likewise, be divinely judged (2:1).

Ernest Käsemann, looking forward to chapter 2 assumes that this figure is Jew.¹⁷ This, however, would not follow the flow of discussion thus far. Those who had understood Paul to be addressing the Gentiles and subsequently indicting Gentile idolatry and sexual immorality might continue to understand Paul here as discussing the Gentile. Paul, however, does not actually characterize this particular individual as a Jew or a Gentile. Rather, as likewise suggested by Robert Jewett,¹⁸ at this particular juncture, the "man" may be understood to be a rhetorical figure representative of a particular type of human being, whether Jew or Gentile – that is, the hypocrite.

¹⁷ Ernst Käsemann, *Commentary on Romans* (Grand Rapids: Eerdemans, 1980), 52

¹⁸ Jewett, *Romans*, 196-203.

Paul warns the “man” moreover: “by your hard and impenitent heart you are storing up wrath for yourself on the day of wrath” (2:5). In using the term “hardness” (σκληρότητα) he seems to be specifically pointing to those who have failed to heed the command of Deut 10:16.¹⁹ The LXX version of Deut 10:16 reads as follows:

16 καὶ περιτεμεῖσθε τὴν σκληροκαρδίαν ὑμῶν καὶ τὸν τράχηλον ὑμῶν
οὐ σκληρυνεῖτε ἔτι

16 And circumcise your hard-heart and no longer harden your neck

As may be noted, the LXX here refers to the “hard-heart” (σκληροκαρδίαν). The MT, meanwhile, has “foreskin of your hearts” (עֲרֵלָתָא לְבַבְכֶּם). In light of this, it may be argued that Paul is already beginning, though not explicitly, to address the issue of circumcision and is setting up for his argument regarding Deut 10:16 and circumcision of the heart found later in the chapter. What may be noted for now is that, according to Paul, hardness of heart in an individual has an ultimate future consequence.

¹⁹ See also the LXX versions of Jer 4:4 as well Acts 7:51.

3.2 “Works” vs. “A Good Work” and the “Work of the Law”: Human Works vs. the Singular “Work” of an Impartial God

Having warned the “man” about future judgment, Paul then, in verse 2:6, specifically quotes Prov 24:12:

ἀποδώσει ἐκάστῳ κατὰ τὰ ἔργα αὐτοῦ·

He will render to each according to his works.

He indicates here that every man will be compensated according to his ἔργα “works” or “deeds.” It may be noted that the term ἔργα in verse 6 has a general sense and does not signify some distinct national practice but any action of an individual whether good or bad. Since Paul has just warned the hypocrite about future judgment, bad works seem to be implied.

He then specifies, as though in contrast, that “those who through endurance of a good work seek glory and honor and incorruption” will receive “eternal life” while those who are “disobedient to the truth” will receive “wrath and fury”:

7 τοῖς μὲν καθ’ ὑπομονὴν ἔργου ἀγαθοῦ δόξαν καὶ τιμὴν καὶ
ἀφθαρσίαν ζητοῦσιν ζωὴν αἰώνιον, 8 τοῖς δὲ ἐξ ἐριθείας καὶ
ἀπειθοῦσι τῇ ἀληθείᾳ πειθομένοις δὲ τῇ ἀδικίᾳ ὀργὴ καὶ θυμός.

7 to those who through endurance of a good work seek glory and honor and incorruption, eternal life; 8 but to those who out of factious ambition are disobedient to the truth, persuading the unrighteous, wrath and fury

There is a noted shift here from ἔργα (“works”) in verse 6 to ἔργου ἀγαθοῦ (“a good work”) in verse 7. Some see import to this shift whereas others do not.²⁰ As will be argued here, there does seem to be critical significance to the shift. This point, however, will be discussed a little further on.

Continuing on the theme of judgment in verse 9-10, Paul indicates that punishments and rewards will be meted out respectively to those who do evil or good. In doing so, however, he specifically brings in the categories of the Jew and the Greek:

9 θλίψις καὶ στενοχωρία ἐπὶ πᾶσαν ψυχὴν ἀνθρώπου τοῦ
κατεργαζομένου τὸ κακόν, Ἰουδαίου τε πρῶτον καὶ Ἑλλήνος·
10 δόξα δὲ καὶ τιμὴ καὶ εἰρήνη παντὶ τῷ ἐργαζομένῳ τὸ ἀγαθόν,
Ἰουδαίῳ τε πρῶτον καὶ Ἑλληνι· 11 οὐ γάρ ἐστιν προσωποληψία
παρὰ τῷ θεῷ.

9 There will be tribulation and distress upon every human soul/being who works evil, the Jew first and also the Greek, 10 but glory and honor and peace for all who work good, the Jew first and also the Greek. 11 For there is no partiality [“lifting of faces”] with God.

²⁰ For discussion of this point see Jewett, *Romans*, 204.

There are actually some interesting reversals here. Whereas, previously, in 1:16, Paul had pointed out that salvation was to the Jew first, he now relates that there will be tribulation and distress first for the Jew and also for the Greek. In other words, thus far he has indicated a seeming advantage of favor bestowed upon the Jew - that of having salvation declared to them first. Here, however, he indicates that this first position has another side. Namely, the Jew, to whom salvation was first declared, will, when practicing evil, also be the first to be punished. In the very next line, however, Paul again reverses this seeming disadvantage, pointing out that the Jew who does good will also be the first to be rewarded by “glory, honor and peace.”

He then adds a phrase that seems, in some sense, to contradict what he has just said regarding the priority of the Jew: For God is not a “lifter of faces” (verse 11). This term, “lifter of faces” (προσωπολημψία) is a semiticism²¹ that refers to the idea of favoritism. In using this particular term, Paul seems here to be again engaging Deut 10, this time quoting verse 17, a verse that suggests that God does not show partiality with people.

²¹ The term προσωπολημψία seems, actually, to be closer to the phrasing found in the MT (רָם פָּנִים, “lifter of faces”) than in the LXX (θαυμάζει πρόσωπον - “admirer of faces”). See also discussion in Jewett, *Romans*, 209. It is of further note that the term προσωπολημψία appears twice in the narrative of Acts – first by Peter during his visit with Cornelius (Acts 10:34) and again by Peter (in reference to the Cornelius episode) during the Apostolic Council (Acts 15:1). In both cases, the point being made is that circumcision of the flesh does not the basis for God’s favor. The term is also used by Paul in Gal 1:6. As I hope to discuss elsewhere, that circumcision was, in the first century CE, indeed considered a basis for chosenness seems indicated by a text found in Pseudo-Philo.

Consideration of the original context of Deut 10:17, moreover, reveals that the verse is found in a passage which mirrors the seeming tension in Paul's present discussion between the idea of God's seeming favoritism (regarding the Jew) on the one hand and egalitarianism on the other. Specifically, Deut 10:15 suggests that God loved the forefather and chose their descendants above all other nations. Yet, on the other hand, Deut 10:17-19 suggests that God shows no partiality and loves the stranger. What is of crucial importance here is that bridging the two concepts found respectively in Deut 10:15 and 10:17 is the command to circumcise the heart (Deut 10:16).²² Once again then, Paul seems to be setting up for his more explicit argument regarding Deut 10:16 and circumcision of the heart later in the chapter.

Paul then suggests that those who do not have the law, that is the Mosaic law, will perish without it (verse 12). This seems to follow upon his case in chapter 1 that God is known to humanity from the creation but since men did not honor God, he gave them up to wickedness (1:29). In other words, Paul seems to be still highlighting human culpability with respect to the law on the basis of the witness of creation. Along with this, he seems to see the law as universally applicable, whether one might be familiar with the written expression of it or not.

He then states the following:

13 οὐ γὰρ οἱ ἀκροαταὶ νόμου δίκαιοι παρὰ ὁ[τῷ] θεῷ, ἀλλ' οἱ ποιηταὶ νόμου δικαιωθήσονται.^τ 14 ὅταν γὰρ ἔθνη τὰ μὴ νόμον ἔχοντα φύσει τὰ τοῦ νόμου ποιῶσιν, οὗτοι νόμον μὴ ἔχοντες ἑαυτοῖς εἰσιν νόμος·

²² Regarding Paul's engagement of Deut 10: 15-17, see also Stowers, *Rereading*, 155.

13 For the hearers of the law *are* not just by God, but the doers of the law shall be justified. 14 For when the Gentiles, who have not the law, do by nature the law, these, not having the law, are a law unto themselves.

Throughout the biblical corpus, there is a repeated call to hear the law.²³ As Paul points out, however, in order to be justified before God, it is not sufficient alone to hear the law but to do it. Again, what seems an advantage, namely that the Jews have the law, is contingent on doing the law - that is, upon obedience.

Returning again to the Gentile, he points out that even those who do not have the law, might have the law: How could the Gentiles, however, be a “law unto themselves”? Here again we find the same concept as found in the writings of Philo. As may be recalled, for Philo, Abraham was a “law unto himself” because he “did the law,” without having received the law from Moses at Sinai (*Abr.* 275-276 cf. *Mos.* 2.4), by nature. As mentioned earlier, Philo appeals to Gen 26:5, a verse which states that Abraham obeyed God and performed or did all of his law (see *Migr.* 130).

As will be seen, Paul seems to be making a similar case regarding Gentiles who are a “law unto themselves.” First, in verse 15, he states the following:

οἵτινες ἐνδείκνυνται τὸ ἔργον τοῦ νόμου γραπτὸν ἐν ταῖς καρδίαις αὐτῶν

²³ The declaration of the oneness of Israel’s God (Deut 6:4 - traditionally referred to as the *Shema*) is framed in a call to hear. For more on this topic, see Jewett, *Romans*, 211.

They display the work of the law written in their hearts

Whereas earlier, Paul had brought up the figure of one who seemed to be judging others, here he indicates that those who are “doers of the law” “prove” or “demonstrate,” “indicate” or “display” (ἐνδείκνυνται) that the “work of the law” is in their hearts.

In as much as he refers to the law, it is possible that Paul is referring to the “work of God” mentioned in LXX of Ex 32:16:

καὶ αἱ πλάκες ἔργον θεοῦ ἦσαν καὶ ἡ γραφὴ γραφὴ θεοῦ ἐστὶν
κεκολαμμένη ἐν ταῖς πλαξίν

and the tablets were a work of God and the writing is the writing of God
engraved in the tablets

In this verse of the LXX, the tablets of the law with the commandments written by God himself are called a “work of God” (ἔργον θεοῦ). Meanwhile, in Prov 3:3, the heart itself is depicted as a tablet. Also, Jer 31:33 specifically states that God would put his law in the minds of his people and write it on their hearts.

With these verses in mind, it may be suggested that what Paul is claiming is that those who actually *do* the law actually display “the work of the law” that is the “work of God” or the “tablets of the law” in their hearts.²⁴ This “work of the law”

²⁴ I have translated Rom 2:15 above according to the traditional reading. It should be noted, however, that although γραπτὸν is generally treated as though it

seems equivalent to the “good work” mentioned earlier by Paul in 2:7. Thus, the shift earlier from the plural “works of the law” (2:6) to the singular “good work” (2:7) seems to signify the difference between many deeds or “works of the law” (whether good or bad) done by man and the singular “good work” or “work of God” in the heart that, in turn, results in the performance of the divine law. This would comport with what Paul suggests in Phil 1:6:

πεποιθὼς αὐτὸ τοῦτο, ὅτι ὁ ἐναρξάμενος ἐν ὑμῖν ἔργον ἀγαθὸν
ἐπιτελέσει ἄχρι ἡμέρας Χριστοῦ Ἰησοῦ

Having faith in this, that he who performs in you a good work will bring it to completion until the day of Christ Jesus.

What may be argued is that just as in Philippians, Paul in Rom 2:15 is suggesting that the “good work” is a work performed by God himself. This, in turn, produces an outward display of the “work of the law” in the heart.

Indeed, it may be noted that Paul compares those with the holy spirit to the stone tablets of the Decalogue in 2 Cor 3:3:

were a participle, (that is, as a word describing an action performed upon the heart: thus, “the work of the law *written* in their hearts”), γραπτὸν actually seems to be an adjective modifying “work” thus, more properly: “the *written work* of the law in their hearts.” As argued above, this “written work” may be identified as the “tablets of the law” which, in LXX Ex 32:16, are defined as “a “work” of God engraved with the “writing of God.”

φανερούμενοι ὅτι ἐστὲ ἐπιστολὴ Χριστοῦ διακονηθεῖσα ὑφ' ἡμῶν,
ἐγγεγραμμένη οὐ μέλανι ἀλλὰ πνεύματι θεοῦ ζῶντος, οὐκ ἐν πλαξὶν
λιθίναις ἀλλ' ἐν πλαξὶν καρδίαις σαρκίνοις.

You are manifesting that you are an epistle of Christ, ministered by us,
inscribed not with ink but by the spirit of the living God, not in tablets made
of stone but in tablets of made of flesh

Paul, in Rom 2.15, thus seems to be intimating something similar to what is found in
2 Cor 3:3. That is, in 2 Cor 3:3 Paul suggests that those in Corinth who possessed the
holy spirit were as a living epistle or tablet.²⁵ In Rom 2:15, meanwhile, Paul
suggests that those who do the law show that they have what was written on the
stone tablets of the law in their hearts.

Paul's conception of law is not so different here from that of Philo. In other
words, Paul seems to understand the Mosaic law as expressed, at least, in the ten
commandments, to represent a universal law that might become manifest in the
lives of those who have the holy spirit or do the law even without having the written
law – such individuals are living manifestations of the written law, that is living
laws.

²⁵ This seems to be a suggestion of the fulfillment of Ezek 36:26-27, verses
which describe a time in which God would give his people the holy spirit, remove
their hearts of stone.

3.3 A More Specific Indictment of the Jewish “Teacher”

Paul then faults the one who calls or names himself “a Jew,” who knows and teaches the law to others but breaks the law himself (2:17-23). Though a sharp critique, Paul has actually eased somewhat into this point having begun with a general indictment of the wicked in humanity and then the hypocrite. Moreover, as may be recalled, Paul claims in 1:9 that judgment falls upon the Jew first. He thus begins his more specific indictment with the Jew first. He will deal with the boastful or arrogant Gentile later in the letter, namely in 8:11. As Stowers, rightly notes, however, Paul is not condemning all Jews here (nor even all Jewish teachers) but, more specifically, those who call themselves Jews, teachers and embodiments of the law while actually breaking the law.²⁶

Continuing the theme of light and darkness, Paul, in Rom 2:19, seems to chide the individual who calls himself a “Jew” and who drew perhaps upon verses such as Isa 42:7 and 9:2 (which speak of bringing guidance to the blind and light to those in darkness), Deut 4:6-8, Zech 8:23, Isa 49:6 and 60:3 (which point to Israel or the Jew serving as an example, teacher or light for other nations) as well as Ps 119:105, Prov 6:23 and Isa 8:20 (which point to the law as a light) for claiming to be a “guide” to the blind and a “light” to those in darkness.

In verse 24 he suggests that this act of naming oneself a Jew but acting against the law ultimately results in the desecration of another name – the name of God. Quoting Isa 52:5, he states, “For, as it is written: For the name of God, through you, is blasphemed among the [Gentiles] nations.” Since Paul understands himself as

²⁶ See Stowers, *Rereading*, 143-158.

having been given the divinely appointed task of bringing about the “obedience of faith among all the nations for the sake of the name of God” (1.5) verse 24 would seem to suggest that the one who calls himself a “Jew” but causes the name of God to be desecrated among the nations is operating in opposition to God and to Paul as well. Moreover, such an individual might be a Jew by descent, by conversion²⁷ or self-appellation.

Indeed, a central issue at stake in this discussion, similar to that seen earlier in the passage from Epictetus, is the notion of identity and name – Who is the real Jew or who can be properly named or called a “Jew” (at least in the sense that, according to Paul, most counts)? As will be seen, Paul will go on to address this very question.

3.4 The True Jew and Circumcision of the Heart as the Circumcision that Counts

Finally, towards the end of the chapter, Paul explicitly brings up the issue of circumcision:

25 Περιτομή μὲν γὰρ ὠφελεῖ ἐὰν νόμον πράσσης· ἐὰν δὲ παραβάτης νόμου ᾖ, ἡ περιτομή σου ἀκροβυστία γέγονεν. 26 ἐὰν οὖν ἡ ἀκροβυστία τὰ δικαιώματα τοῦ νόμου φυλάσῃ, οὐχ ἡ ἀκροβυστία αὐτοῦ εἰς περιτομὴν λογισθήσεται· 27 καὶ κρινεῖ ἢ ἐκ φύσεως ἀκροβυστία ἢ τὸν νόμον τελοῦσα σὲ τὸν διὰ γράμματος καὶ περιτομῆς

²⁷ Converts or their descendants may have engaged in teaching. According to tradition, for example, the well-known and acclaimed tannaitic sage, Rabbi Akiva, was the son of a proselyte.

παραβάτην νόμου. 28 οὐ γὰρ ὁ ἐν τῷ φανερῷ Ἰουδαῖός ἐστιν οὐδὲ ἡ ἐν τῷ φανερῷ ἐν σαρκὶ περιτομή, 29 ἀλλ' ὁ ἐν τῷ κρυπτῷ Ἰουδαῖος, καὶ περιτομή καρδίας ἐν πνεύματι οὐ γράμματι, οὗ ὁ ἔπαινος οὐκ ἐξ ἀνθρώπων ἀλλ' ἐκ τοῦ θεοῦ.

26 For circumcision is indeed of benefit (advantage, value) if you practice the law; but if you are a breaker of law, your circumcision will become foreskin. Therefore if the uncircumcised one guards the righteous requirement of the law will not his foreskin be reckoned as circumcision? 27 and he who fulfills the law while in physical nature foreskinned will judge you who, through letter and circumcision, break the law. 28 for the “Jew” is not one in that which is manifest nor is circumcision in that which is manifest in flesh. 29 but a Jew is the one in the hidden (parts) and circumcision of the heart is in spirit and not letter. His praise [approval, commendation] is not from men but from God.

As may be seen, Paul seems to continue on the subject of false righteousness claiming, in essence, that God will not count the physical circumcision of those who break the law.

It should be underscored, however, that Paul expressly states at the beginning of the passage (verse 26) that “Circumcision is indeed of benefit [advantage, value] if you practice the law.” Critically then, physical circumcision is of benefit or value but its benefit is contingent upon actual practice or observance of

the law.²⁸ Indeed, so significant is law observance to Paul however that, according to him, any man who keeps or guards the precepts of the law is considered by God to be circumcised, even though they might not be physically circumcised.

Again, as reviewed in chapter 2, there seems, in the first century, to have been different opinions as to what actually rendered one a Jew. Certain texts or characters in certain narratives seem to present circumcision as closely associated with or a requirement for becoming an “Israelite” or “Jew” (Jacob’s sons (Gen 34:14), those seeking to be saved during the time of Esther (LXX Esth 9:17); Achior (Jdt. 14:10); and King Izates (*A.J.* 20.145-6)). Others, however, seem to highlight the leaving of idolatry and the earnest decision or commitment to observe the law as the most decisive factor (Philo *Migr.*, 92-93; Ananias (*A.J.* 20.17-96); those in non-Greek cities (Pet. *Frag.* 37), Tac. *Hist* 5.1-2). Yet others seem not to have required it at all or considered it optional (The extreme allegorizers (*Migr.* 92-93); Metilius (*B.J.* 2. 454); those of “Greek” cities (Pet. *Frag.* 37).

Paul, then, would have been well within the realm of Jewish views of his day, in considering a man who observed other aspects of the law but had not been physically circumcised as a fellow Jew. Yet, perhaps, precisely due to the existence of differences in opinion on the matter, he finds it necessary to address the critical question – what exactly makes one a Jew? Is physical circumcision the decisive factor?

²⁸ The terms ποιέω “to do” and πράσσω “to practice” have slightly different valences (action vs. repeated action) but are used in the same contexts by Paul (see for example Rom 1:32). See also Craig Evans, “Paul and ‘Works of Law’ Language in Late Antiquity,” in *Paul and His Opponents* (ed. Stanley Porter; Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2005), 220-221.

Paul does not defer to social construct here. Rather, he makes the case here that, from the divine perspective, physical circumcision is not the most critical feature of a Jew. In 2:26, he suggests that even if someone is physically circumcised, if they break the law, their circumcision will become in God's view, as foreskin. His statement in 2:26 seems, just as 1:17 to likewise refer to Hab 2. This time, however, he seems to draw upon verse 16 (in the MT), a verse in Habakkuk that describes the fate of those who cause others to become drunk in order to expose their nakedness:

שְׂבַעְתָּ קִלְיוֹן מִכְבוֹד שְׁתַּה גַּם־אַתָּה
וְהִעָרַל תִּפְסֹב עָלֶיךָ כּוֹס יְמִין יְהוָה
וְקִקְלִיֹן עַל־כְּבוֹדֶךָ

You are sated with disgrace over glory, Drink! you as well and become fore-skinned, the cup of the right-hand of the Lord will be turned upon you and disgrace will be upon your glory.

As discussed, in the previous chapter, foreskin, in the biblical corpus is considered a shame or reproach. The text here seems to warn, however, that those who are circumcised but cause shame to others will themselves be shamed. This inversion is fulfilled through and represented by the cup in the Lord's right-hand being turned upon or inverted upon them. Paul here likewise suggests that those who practice evil, though physically circumcised, will ultimately be shamed, becoming, in God's judgment, uncircumcised - more specifically, as noted by Dunn, epispaetic!²⁹

²⁹ Dunn, *Romans*, 121.

On the other hand, Paul suggests that the one who is uncircumcised but observes the precepts of the law is considered circumcised by God. Again, presumably, Paul means that God will view such individuals *as though* they were physically circumcised.

He then makes the point that a “Jew” cannot be identified in what is visible or manifest in the flesh (1:28). It is important to note here that Paul is speaking here of a “Jew” primarily in the religious sense (and not an ethnic or geographic sense). What he seems to suggest here is that the true or real “Jew” is one whose circumcision is “hidden” in the heart. His appeal here is again to Deut 10:16 which commands the circumcision of the heart.

He seems, moreover, to be playing on the notion that physical circumcision of the flesh, generally a hidden sign, is sometimes visible to others. What is not visible to others, however, is what is hidden in the heart – whether good or evil. Indeed, Paul has already stated in 2:16 that God will judge the hidden or secret things (τὰ κρυπτὰ) of men. It is interesting to note too that the word κρυπτῶ (found in 1:29) appears in the LXX in Ezek 8:12, that is, in the same passage mentioned before (albeit the MT version) describing the sin committed in secret by the elders of Israel. On another front, in terms of the idea of that which is hidden, it may be noted that the tablets of the law that were in the ark, could not be physically seen, even by the high priest on Yom Kippur.

Paul’s point is that while people might look for and be concerned with what is outward, God knows and is concerned not only with what people do in public, but also what they do in secret and think privately in their hearts. God, therefore, is the

only one who can determine whether or not the law, and thus the commandment regarding circumcision of the heart, is being fulfilled. In this sense, it seems that Paul is actually suggesting that one can be considered a Jew, that is, a full proselyte, *without* circumcision.

Yet, this, of course, leaves a critical question - if circumcision of the heart is most important and it is possible to be considered circumcised without actually being physically circumcised, what then, exactly, is the point of physical circumcision at all? Indeed, as pointed out by Eleazar in Josephus' story of King Izates of Abiadene (*AJ* 20.43-45) circumcision is also one of the laws. Thus if, as Paul seems to suggest, law observance is of critical importance and the commandment regarding physical circumcision is one of the laws, how then could an uncircumcised Gentile be considered law observant without being physically circumcised? As will be seen, Paul goes on to address this very question.

4. Chapter 3

4.1 What is the Value of Physical Circumcision?

At the beginning of chapter 3, it is evident that Paul has anticipated these questions. Adding a query regarding the advantage of the Jew and the benefit or value of circumcision he rhetorically asks the following (verses 1-2):

1 Τί οὖν τὸ περισσὸν τοῦ Ἰουδαίου ἢ τίς ἡ ὠφέλεια τῆς περιτομῆς; 2 πολὺ κατὰ πάντα

1 What then is the advantage of the Jew? Or what is the benefit (value, advantage) of the circumcision? 2 Much in every way!

In broad strokes, Paul's discourse on circumcision has thus far run as follows:

- 1) Physical circumcision is of benefit only if one obeys the law (2:25)
- 2) One who breaks the law, though physically circumcised, is considered as though he were not physically circumcised
- 3) One who obeys the law and is circumcised in the heart is considered as though he was physically circumcised (2:26-29)
- 4) What then is the benefit of physical circumcision? (3:1)

On the one hand, Paul's question, "What is the benefit of the circumcision?" directly follows his question regarding the advantage of the Jew. In this way, it appears that Paul is inquiring about the benefit of physical circumcision for the Jew.

Yet, in terms of his larger discussion regarding circumcision, his question actually follows upon his suggestion that those who are *not* physically circumcised, that is, uncircumcised Gentiles, but keep the law will be considered as though they *are* physically circumcised. In this way, his question, that is, "What is the benefit of the circumcision?" may also be read as a question regarding the value of physical circumcision for Gentiles. In other words, Paul has just argued that, in the keeping of the other commandments, the uncircumcised Gentile is *already* considered circumcised by God. What benefit then would there be in physical circumcision for *him*? Given his arguments thus far, Paul's question reads as applying equally to Jews and Gentiles. His question in 3:1 seems then to be - "What is the benefit of physical

circumcision for anyone at all”? Also, it may be noted that he speaks here in the present tense. In other words, his question concerns the value of circumcision not *prior* to the advent of Christ but *now* precisely in the light of Christ’s advent.

Paul’s response to his own question regarding the advantage of the Jew and the benefit of physical circumcision is: “Much in every way” (3:1). Since this phrase follows both questions, it would seem that it applies to both questions. In other words, the advantage of the Jew is “much in every way” and the benefit circumcision is also “much in every way.”

He then responds to the first question, that is: “What advantage has the Jew?” by stating that they “are entrusted with the oracles of God” (3:2). He continues, however, in the chapter by making it clear that despite this “advantage,” the Jews are not ultimately “better off” than Gentiles because, according to him, both Greeks and Jews are “under the power of sin” (3:9). Indeed, just as there is no partiality, there is no “distinction” (3:22) between Jew and Gentile since “all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (3:23).

Yet, although Paul seems to have indicated that the value of physical circumcision is “Much in every way,” he seems to provide no real explanation for this viewpoint in chapter 3. Instead, what we find is: 1) a seeming complication in his attitude toward the law; and 2) a reiteration of the value or benefit which physical circumcision, in his view, most definitely does not possess – namely, the power of justification.

Regarding the seeming complication in his attitude toward the law, as mentioned, it is, according to Paul, the “doers of the law” (2:13) who will be justified.

He also states in 2:25 that circumcision has value for those who “obey the law.” Yet here, in chapter 3, Paul seems to precisely suggest that no one is considered righteous or justified through the law (verse 20):

διότι ἐξ ἔργων νόμου οὐ δικαιωθήσεται πᾶσα σὰρξ ἐνώπιον αὐτοῦ,
διὰ γὰρ νόμου ἐπίγνωσις ἁμαρτίας.

For no flesh will be justified before his face by works of law, since through law comes the knowledge of sin.

Paul here seems to be responding to the view that “works of law,” that is, deeds performed in obedience to the law, were necessary for justification or righteousness. The concept seems to be based on Deut 6:25:

וְצִדְקָה תִּתִּיחַ לָנוּ כִּי־נִשְׁמֹר לַעֲשׂוֹת
אֶת־כָּל־הַמִּצְוֹת הַזֹּאת לִפְנֵי יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵינוּ
כְּאֲשֶׁר צֻוֵּנוּ

And it will be righteousness for us, if/when we are careful to observe all this commandment before the Lord our God as He has commanded us.

According to Deuteronomy then, in order to be deemed righteousness it is necessary to observe “all this commandment.”

Reference to the specific phrase “works of law” is attested outside of the NT corpus³⁰ in the DSS document, 4QMMT:

We have written some works of the law which we think are good for you and for your people....And it will be reckoned to you for righteousness when you do what is upright and good before Him for your good for Israel.³¹

As may be seen, the writer, presumably drawing from Deut 6:25, seems to suggest here that doing “works of law” will be “reckoned” as “righteousness.” Paul, meanwhile, seems to contradict himself since he suggests, on the one hand, that “the doers of the law will be justified” (2:13) and yet, on the other, that no one can be “justified in His sight by works of the law” (3:20). Gathering from what will be seen later in the epistle, it seems that, for Paul, the critical distinction is based on the place from which one starts – whether from faith in God or the self. It seems that, in Paul’s view, performing the law or “the works of the law” *without* faith cannot produce righteous standing before God (3:38). The “doers of the law” (2:13, 25) are justified, however, since they observe the law “from the heart” (6:17) and practice the “obedience of faith” (16:26). Thus, as will be seen later, Paul argues that circumcision *does* have value for those who have faith (16:26) in the God of Abraham.

³⁰ For a helpful collection of texts relating to the notion of “works of law” see Evans, “Paul and ‘Works of Law’ Language in Late Antiquity,” 201-226.

³¹ Martinez and Tigchelaar, *The Dead Sea Scrolls Study Edition*, vol. 2, 803.

In verse 28, Paul reiterates his view that a man is justified by faith apart from works of the law and returns to the topic of circumcision stating the following (28-30):

28 λογίζομεθα γὰρ δικαιοῦσθαι πίστει ἄνθρωπον χωρὶς ἔργων νόμου.

29 ἢ Ἰουδαίων ὁ θεὸς Ἰμόνον; οὐχὶ καὶ ἐθνῶν; ναὶ καὶ ἐθνῶν,

30 εἵπερ εἷς ὁ θεὸς ὃς δικαιώσει περιτομὴν ἐκ πίστεως καὶ

ἀκροβυστίαν διὰ τῆς πίστεως. νόμον οὖν καταργοῦμεν διὰ τῆς

πίστεως; μὴ γένοιτο· ἀλλὰ νόμον ἱστάνομεν.

28 For we reckon that man is justified by faith apart from works of the law.

29 Or is God the God of the Jews only? Is he not the God of the Gentiles also?

Yes, of Gentiles also, 30 since God is One; he will justify the circumcised on

the ground of their faith and the foreskinned through their faith. 31 Do we

then overthrow the law by this faith? By no means! On the contrary we

uphold the law.

Again as may be recalled, at the beginning of chapter 3, Paul poses the question:

“What is the benefit of circumcision?” He does not explicitly mention circumcision again, however, until the end of the chapter.

Even here, he does not provide information as to the benefit of circumcision but again reiterates his earlier point, namely, that circumcision is *not* of benefit for justification since, according to him, God will justify both the circumcised as well as

the foreskinned through faith (3:30). Critically, he suggests that the law is not overthrown but rather upheld by faith. He has still not explained, however, what value circumcision *does* have. Moreover, he has surfaced another question - how does faith uphold the law?

5. Chapter 4

5.1 Again, What is the Value of Physical Circumcision?

Paul has thus far indicated and reiterated that circumcision is of no value in terms of justification. In chapter 4, he goes on to yet again provide specific proof for this position, this time by highlighting the example of Abraham:

Τί οὖν ἐροῦμεν ‘εὕρηκέναι Ἀβραάμ τὸν προπάτορα ἡμῶν’ κατὰ σάρκα; 2 εἰ γὰρ Ἀβραάμ ἐξ ἔργων ἐδικαιώθη, ἔχει καύχημα, ἀλλ’ οὐ πρὸς θεόν. 3 τί γὰρ ἡ γραφή λέγει; *ἐπίστευσεν δὲ Ἀβραάμ τῷ θεῷ καὶ ἐλογίσθη αὐτῷ εἰς δικαιοσύνην.* 4 τῷ δὲ ἐργαζομένῳ ὁ μισθὸς οὐ λογίζεται κατὰ χάριν ἀλλὰ κατὰ ὀφείλημα, 5 τῷ δὲ μὴ ἐργαζομένῳ πιστεύοντι δὲ ἐπὶ τὸν δικαιούντα τὸν ἄσεβῃ λογίζεται ἡ πίστις αὐτοῦ εἰς δικαιοσύνην

1 What do we say then, Abraham, our forefather according to the flesh, to have found? 2 For if Abraham was justified by works he has something to boast about, but not before God. 3 For what does the scripture say? “Abraham believed God and it was reckoned to him as righteousness.” 4 Now to the one who works, his wages are not reckoned as a gift but his due. 5

And to one who does not work but trusts him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is reckoned as righteousness.

In this particular portion of his epistle, Paul reiterates that those who trust God through faith, not relying on their own “works,” are counted righteous. To make this point, he brings up the example of the patriarch, Abraham, proving through a quote from Gen 15:6 that even Abraham was justified not through his good works but by his faith in God.

Then, through a reference to Psalm 32:1 (LXX 31:1), Paul indicates that those to whom God does not reckon sin, are blessed (Rom 4:6-9):

6 καθάπερ καὶ Δαυὶδ λέγει τὸν μακαρισμὸν τοῦ ἀνθρώπου ᾧ ὁ θεὸς
λογίζεται δικαιοσύνην χωρὶς ἔργων

7 μακάριοι ὧν ἀφέθησαν αἱ ἀνομίαι
καὶ ὧν ἐπεκαλύφθησαν αἱ ἁμαρτίαι

8 μακάριος ἀνὴρ ᾧ οὐ μὴ λογίσηται κύριος ἁμαρτίαν.

9 Ὁ μακαρισμὸς οὖν οὗτος ἐπὶ τὴν περιτομὴν ἢ καὶ ἐπὶ τὴν
ἀκροβυστίαν;

6 So also David pronounces a blessing upon the man to whom God reckons righteousness apart from works: 7 ‘Blessed are those whose lawlessness acts are let go and whose sins are covered; 8 blessed is the man against whom the

Lord will not reckon his sin. 9 Is this blessing, therefore, upon the circumcised or even upon the uncircumcised?

Again, the notion that obedience to the law would produce blessing is found in several places in the Pentateuch (Lev 26:3-13 and Deut 7:12-15; 11:13-15, 27; 28:1-14). Paul, however, has already pointed in chapter 3 out that that all have sinned. As such, the blessing might not apply. He indicates, however, that all is not lost since David pronounces a blessing on those who have committed “lawlessness” or “sin,” but have been forgiven.

David, of course, himself serves as a prime example of this. Though circumcised and known for his righteousness, the king was also famous for his sins.³² Yet, nevertheless, according to tradition, the blessings of God notably rest upon David. Paul thus perhaps quotes the words of David, not only for the sake of the message of David’s words³³ but also in order to highlight his example. Indeed, Paul has already mentioned that the Messiah came through David (1:3).

In what way, however, does Psalm 31 serve specifically as a proof regarding the blessing of both the circumcised and the uncircumcised? Why draw upon this particular verse when others might have been used? One key may lie in the portion of the psalm not explicitly quoted. In this portion there seems to be a reference to the story of Jonah. Of course, the irony of the story of Jonah is that those to whom the prophet was sent, those who may have also been uncircumcised, seem in the

³² See also Rom 2:22.

³³ It might be noted that the author of 4QMMT specifically encourages the reading of the Psalms of David.

narrative to be more righteous than the prophet himself. It was only when Jonah humbled himself, that his prayers were heard.

However, the verse that Paul quotes may actually serve itself as a proof. What may be noted is that Psalm 32 (LXX Psalm 31:1), as quoted in Rom 3:7, describes forgiveness offered in two different ways: “let go” or “covered.” Given the context, Paul seems to be taking the let go/covered distinction as an allusion to the circumcised/uncircumcised dichotomy. That is, Paul seems to imply here that the phrases “let go” and “covered” to represent two different states in which a man might come to be forgiven – either while circumcised, that is a state in which the foreskin is “let go” or while uncircumcised, that is, in a state in which the foreskin remains (and the glans, therefore, remains “covered”). The point is that in either case, whether “let go” or “covered” the granting of forgiveness is the same.³⁴ Paul’s query regarding whether the blessing of God is upon only the circumcised or the uncircumcised as well also functions as a rhetorical pivot point; calling, on the one hand, for his audience to consider the text to which he has just referred as well as the more explicit case he is about to make.

³⁴ It might be noted that, in Jewish tradition, the book of Habbakuk, Psalm 32 as well as the Book of Jonah are specific readings for Yom Kippur. Peshier Habbakuk in the DSS deals with Yom Kippur. According to rabbinic literature, Abraham was circumcised on Yom Kippur. The righteous are, moreover, considered to be “sealed” on Yom Kippur. Also, Paul, in Rom 2:24 chastises the teacher for blaspheming the name of God, which itself was pronounced only on Yom Kippur. Thus far, the themes of judgment, righteous standing before God, the “covering” of sin and reconciliation engaged in Romans seem to correspond with those related to Yom Kippur. Regarding yet a further possible connection with Yom Kippur see also the discussion in Jewett, *Romans*, 284-287 on Paul’s use of the term *ἵλασθήριον* in Rom 3:25.

Paul then continues his discourse, showcasing the example of Abraham and indicating that Abraham's righteous standing before God was based not his works but rather on his faith. Those who were advocating circumcision as a requirement for righteous standing may have turned specifically to Gen 26:4-5, a passage that suggests that the seed of Isaac was to be multiplied and to serve as a blessing to the nations precisely because Abraham kept God's voice, commandments, statutes and laws. Paul's point, however, is that Abraham's obedience was not a product of his own efforts or doings but was, rather, an outworking of his faith.

In demonstrating this point, he poses, in verse 10, a simple rhetorical question: How was Abraham "reckoned righteous" by God? In order, though, to arrive at the answer to this question of *how* Abraham was reckoned righteous, he proceeds immediately to the question of *when*: When was Abraham reckoned righteous? Was it *before* or *after* he was circumcised? Replying to his own question, Paul states it was "not after, but before he was circumcised" (verse 10).

With mathematical precision, Paul has actually answered his first question, (that is, "How was Abraham reckoned righteous?") through his second ("When was Abraham reckoned righteous?"). Although he doesn't refer to it explicitly, his proof text lies in Gen 15:1-6 and its placement within the biblical narrative. According to Gen 15:5, Abraham is told by God that his descendants would be as the stars in the heaven. Verse 6 goes on to state that Abraham *believed* this promise and was accordingly deemed "righteous." Since this particular passage is situated *before* the passage in which Abraham is given the covenant of circumcision (found in Gen 17) and since, according to the chronology of the biblical narrative, the events of Gen

15:1-6 took place 14 years before the covenant of circumcision was given, Paul concludes that Abraham was deemed “righteous” by God through his faith *well before* his circumcision. Abraham’s circumcision thus could not have provided him with righteous standing before God. Thus, in response to the question of *how* Abraham was reckoned righteous – Paul asserts that it was not through his circumcision but rather through his faith.

This proof of course leaves a critical question to be answered - If Abraham was reckoned righteous through his faith, what then was the purpose of his circumcision? Paul’s proof regarding how Abraham was reckoned righteous has finally brought him to the question posed at the beginning of chapter 3, namely – What then is value of physical circumcision?

5.2 Physical Circumcision is a Sign or Seal of the Righteousness Produced by Faith

This is what Paul states in the first half of verse 11:

καὶ σημεῖον ἔλαβεν ᾠ περιτομῆς σφραγίδα τῆς δικαιοσύνης τῆς πίστεως τῆς ἐν τῇ ἀκροβυστίᾳ

And he took circumcision as a sign, as a seal of the righteousness of the faith he had while fore-skinned.

There are several points of import here. First, it should be noted that ἔλαβεν is most often translated as “he received.” The term, however, may be rendered “he took.”³⁵ Indeed, it may be of note here that perhaps in the DSS and certainly according to the rabbinic tradition, Abraham did not simply receive circumcision. Rather, he circumcised himself.³⁶ Such a reading seems to be based on consideration of Gen 17:26 in which the verb נָמַח (“was circumcised”) may also be read reflexively (“circumcised himself”).³⁷ It seems likely that Paul, in accord with what is found in Jewish tradition, presents Abraham here not as a passive recipient of circumcision but rather a one who actively “took” the sign of circumcision.

Paul indicates, moreover, that circumcision is not the covenant, nor an entry into the covenant but rather the “sign” (σημεῖον) of the covenant. The apostle is not utilizing some novel semiotic theory to make his case here but is deriving his proof straight from the Bible – drawing from no less than the critical passage, Gen 17, itself! The LXX of Gen 17:11 reads as follows:

καὶ περιτμηθήσεσθε τὴν σάρκα τῆς ἀκροβυστίας ὑμῶν καὶ ἔσται ἐν
σημείῳ διαθήκης ἀνὰ μέσον ἐμοῦ καὶ ὑμῶν

³⁵ In accord with the dominant translation of the verb elsewhere in the New Testament.

³⁶ See, for example, CD-A *Damascus Documenta*, Gen. Rab. 48. 2, 4, 5; b. Ned. 31b.

³⁷ My thanks to David Carr for pointing out the possible reflexive reading of נָמַח. The LXX has the 3rd s. aorist passive: περιετμήθη.

And the flesh of your foreskin will be circumcised and it will be in a sign
(σημεῖον) of the fulfillment of the covenant between me and you

As mentioned earlier, Gen 17:10 would seem to suggest that circumcision was the covenant. In other words, read alone, the verse would seem to suggest that circumcision *itself* was the covenant or critical entry point into the covenant. Paul, however, points to the very next verse that follows Gen 17:10, that is to Gen 17:11 quoted above, as a significant counter to such a reading. In other words, Paul reads Gen 17:10 in light of Gen 17:11, understanding circumcision to be not the covenant itself but the sign of the covenant.

Paul's emphasis on the idea of circumcision as a sign is apparent in the Greek of Rom 4:11 since the term "sign" is placed syntactically prior to the word "circumcision." In other words, although awkward in English, the phrase καὶ σημεῖον ἔλαβεν περιτομῆς could be read: "and as a *sign*, he took circumcision."

On the other hand, however, Abraham's circumcision may have served as a kind of authentication by God. With regard to this, it may be noted that, in 2 Thess 3:7, the word "sign" (σημεῖον) refers to personal signature – an element intended to certify the authenticity of the epistle. As mentioned earlier, Paul describes those in 2 Cor 3:3 those in the community in Corinth as living epistles written with the holy spirit. That Paul understands σημεῖον in the sense of certification of approval or authenticity is amplified by his use of the term "seal" (σφραγίδα).³⁸ Paul's suggestion thus seems to be that circumcision served for Abraham just as would a

³⁸ LXX 1 Kings 20:8, Esth 8:8.

seal or impression placed on a waxen stamp signifying the completion and approval of a written document. This would actually correspond with the idea of the written law being in the heart – that is, of man as a living law or legal document.

Indeed, in using the term “seal” Paul may be specifically drawing upon other verses containing the term such as Is. 8:16 – a verse in which the Lord calls for the law (τὸν νόμον) or Torah (MT - תּוֹרָה) to be “sealed” (LXX σφραγιζόμενοι/ MT סִיְמָנוּ) in his disciples. Paul seems to be suggesting that physical circumcision serves as an external seal of those who have the law written spiritually and inwardly in their hearts. Paul, in other words, treats circumcision of the flesh as an outward physical manifestation of circumcision of the heart. This, it would seem, in Paul’s view is the first “value” (3:1) of circumcision.

5.3 Physical Circumcision Made Abraham A Father

The verse and passage continues, however, as follows (verses 11-12):

11 ...εἰς τὸ εἶναι αὐτὸν πατέρα πάντων τῶν πιστευόντων δι’ ἀκροβυστίας, εἰς τὸ λογισθῆναι 12.º[καὶ] αὐτοῖς ῥ[τὴν] δικαιοσύνην, καὶ πατέρα περιτομῆς τοῖς οὐκ ἐκ περιτομῆς μόνον ἀλλὰ καὶ ῥτοῖς στοιχοῦσιν τοῖς ἔχνεσιν τῆς ἐν ἀκροβυστίᾳ πίστεως τοῦ πατρὸς ἡμῶν Ἀβραάμ.

11 ...The purpose [“result”] was to make him father of all who believe while fore-skinned and who thus have righteousness reckoned to them.

12 and father of circumcision, those who are not of circumcision alone but those who also walk in the footsteps of the faith of our father Abraham while fore-skinned.

Having clarified one particular function or value of circumcision as a “sign” or “seal.” Paul now signals another purpose for or result of Abraham’s circumcision – one that focuses on the idea of Abraham becoming a father of two groups.

Traditionally, Paul is read at this critical juncture as presenting Abraham as a spiritual father to the Gentiles without physical circumcision and as father to the Jews physically, in terms descent as well as spiritually through faith and, perhaps, circumcision. Since Paul mentions the uncircumcised first, there is debate as to whether he is highlighting a closer relationship between Abraham and the Gentiles³⁹ or, rather, indicating parity in the relationship of both Gentiles and Jews to the forefather.⁴⁰ The focus, however, of most readings is on the idea of Abraham as a father to both mutually through faith.

³⁹ C.K. Barrett, for example, suggests that for Paul, Abraham serves “first of all” as father of the Gentiles (with the Jews having to “join the ranks” only secondarily). See C.K. Barrett, *The Epistle to the Romans* (London: Adam and Charles Black, 1957), 90-91). Ernst Käsemann produces a similar reading, taking note of the fact that Paul mentions the relationship of the Jews to Abraham not first, but second. See Ernst Käsemann, *Commentary on Romans* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1980), 116.

⁴⁰ In contrast to the reading of Barrett and Käsemann, F.F. Bruce, Dunn, C.E.B. Cranfield and others seem to find in Paul’s view more of a sense of parity between the two groups. Dunn, countering Kasemann, sees a more “balanced statement” in Paul’s treatment of Abraham’s respective relationship between the Jew and the Gentile. See Dunn, *Romans*, 109. Similarly Cranfield states: “it was God’s intention in causing Abraham to be circumcised that he should be the point of union between all who believe, whether circumcised or uncircumcised.” See C.E.B. Cranfield, *Romans 1-8* (London: T&T Clark, 1975), 236-7. See also F.F. Bruce, *The Letter of Paul to the Romans* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1985), 108.

What may be noticed, however, is that Paul, in verse 11, actually uses a purpose (or result) clause - εἰς τὸ εἶναι. This is quite significant as it seems to suggest that Paul considers Abraham's physical circumcision to have had the purpose or result of making him the father of all who believe while physically uncircumcised ("fore-skinned") as well those who are not only physically circumcised but who also follow in the footsteps of the faith that Abraham had while uncircumcised.

That physical circumcision could serve to make Abraham the father of those who were likewise physically circumcised is understandable. The crucial question, however is, how or in what way could Abraham's physical circumcision serve to make him the father of the physically "foreskinned" or uncircumcised (indeed, if the placement of ἀκροβυστίας prior to περιτομῆς serves as any indication, how could physical circumcision have made Abraham *primarily* the father of the physically uncircumcised)?

5.4 Abraham was Circumcised Later in Life

It seems the answer to the question just raised lies in the critical matter of timing. As may be recalled, the biblical command specifically indicates that circumcision must be performed on the eighth day after birth. Yet Abraham himself was not circumcised on the eighth day but, rather, much *later* in life. Indeed, as mentioned earlier, *Gen Rab* 46.2 seems to suggest that Abraham was circumcised at

the late age of 99 precisely in order that proselytes might be likewise encouraged to become circumcised, even at a late age.

With this in mind, it might be suggested that Paul understands Abraham as having become a “father” to the uncircumcised man through the very act of physical circumcision since, as opposed to being circumcised on the eighth day, his physical circumcision came much later in life. In other words, Paul, in 4:11-12, is highlighting the notion of Abraham as a father to those who are reckoned righteous not *without* physical circumcision but, rather, just as Abraham himself, *prior* to physical circumcision. Indeed, in terms of the matter of timing, Abraham is actually more akin and thus more closely a father in *type* to those who are circumcised later in life than to those circumcised on the eighth day.

Paul’s point again is that, just as in the case of Abraham, physical circumcision cannot be considered the means by which the uncircumcised man becomes justified. Rather, both justification and one’s identity as a Jew were matters of the faith and obedience from the heart. This does not mean, however, that Paul, like the “extreme allegorists” mentioned by Philo considered physical circumcision to be therefore of no benefit. Paul in Rom 4:11-12 makes a case that for Abraham, the benefit or value in circumcision was as a sign or seal of the righteousness produced by the faith that he had when he was uncircumcised. Since, however, Paul understands faith as *mutual* to both the Jew and the Gentile, it would stand to reason that he also deemed the physical sign of circumcision to be of equal value for both Jew and Gentile as “sign” or “seal” of the righteousness of faith.

5.5 Abraham was not Circumcised on the Basis of his Physical Descent

Again, the critical question here is, “How did Paul understand Abraham to have become the father of the uncircumcised through the very act of physical circumcision.” As has been argued thus far, Paul’s reasoning would have been predicated on an understanding of Abraham as having been circumcised later in life and an exemplar for those of faith. Another point that might be noted, however, is that Abraham himself was obviously not circumcised because he was a Jew, an Israelite or a descendant of himself. That is, Abraham’s circumcision was not a sign of his particular lineage; it was not a mark of his being of Jewish descent. Rather, it was a sign of the righteousness he had through faith. Thus, assuming that Paul takes Abraham as an exemplar here, Abraham’s own circumcision would make him the father of those who not only followed his example but who, like him, had become circumcised as a matter of faith and not biological descent.

5.6 Abraham’s Sons Follow in his Footsteps

Furthermore, it may be noted that Paul also qualifies in 4:12 that Abraham is father of those who are not only circumcised but who also walk in Abraham’s “footsteps” (ἵχνεσιν). Paul might, on the one hand, be referring here to the Jew.⁴¹ Certainly, given the mention of circumcision and his treatment thus far of the “Greek” and the “Jew,” it is reasonable to assume that the clause refers to the Jew, particularly one, perhaps who might be circumcised on the eighth day. Paul’s point, in this case, would be that it is simply not sufficient to be of the physical lineage of

⁴¹ See, for example, Fitzmeyer, *Romans*, 381.

Abraham and circumcised in infancy. In order to truly be considered Abraham's child, one must follow in Abraham's footsteps; that is, one must live the kind of life that Abraham lived by keeping the commandments through faith.

Yet the proselyte too might be circumcised and might consider themselves thereby to have been granted access to Abrahamic sonship. Paul's caveat would, of course, apply to them as well. That is, whether circumcised as a child or circumcised later in life, physical circumcision does not have on-going merit, one must also walk in Abraham's footsteps.

As may be recalled, Philo suggests that Abraham followed in the steps of the Lord (*Abr.* 38). It may be argued that Paul is likewise suggesting that to follow in the "footsteps" of Abraham means to follow Abraham's example. This idea is also found in the Gospel of John where Jesus, being confronted by the Pharisees says: "If you were Abraham's sons, you would do the works (τὰ ἔργα) of your father" (John 8:39).

The uncircumcised man, therefore, who has begun in faith and already displays the law in their hearts, would, presumably, as a function of that faith and in accord with Abraham's example, *eventually* become physically circumcised. Meanwhile, those who were already circumcised, whether Jew or Gentile, would be expected to continue to follow Abraham as well, not trusting in the sign of their physical circumcision, but actually performing the commandments from the standpoint of faith.

Indeed, it may be noted that circumcision is a one-time act of obedience – either the obedient act of a parent or parents or else of an individual. Paul does not

assign to that singular act or, the results of that act, any *on-going* merit. He does seem, however, to see value in circumcision, not only as a seal, but also perhaps as a visual sign reminding the individual to continue to walk in the footsteps of Abraham, that is, in the obedience of faith.

5.7 Abraham's Seed Inherit the Cosmos through the Righteousness of Faith

Finally, in the latter half of chapter 4, Paul states that those who are sons of Abraham through faith would inherit the cosmos: "The promise to Abraham and his seed, that they should inherit the cosmos, did not come through the law but through the righteousness of faith." Again, as Rom 4:11 indicates, Paul considers physical circumcision to be of value as a seal of this "righteousness of faith." Moreover, in verse 17, Paul specifically cites verse 5 of Gen 17 (the chapter in which Abraham is commanded regarding circumcision) highlighting that Abraham was promised to become the "father of many nations." This, for Paul, demonstrates the inclusion of the Gentiles in the Abrahamic covenant, of which, as discussed, he considered physical circumcision to be a sign.

6. Addressing the Major Lines of Scholarship

6.1 Does Paul Consider the Physical Rite of Circumcision to Have Been Fulfilled through Circumcision of the Heart in the Eschatological Age of the Spirit?

As discussed earlier, both Schriener and Thielman and ultimately, Dunn as well, suggest that Paul understood physical circumcision to have been displaced by circumcision of the heart in the eschatological age of the coming of the holy spirit. Certainly Paul, himself, insists on circumcision of the heart in Rom 2:29.

Yet, does Paul, while recognizing the importance of circumcision of the heart, consider the physical rite to be no longer of value? As argued earlier, circumcision of the heart is indeed primary for Paul. Yet in his view, the value of physical circumcision is not thereby entirely nullified. Rather, the on-going value of physical circumcision is contingent or wholly dependent upon circumcision of the heart. Paul's view, here in Romans, once again, seems akin to that of Philo who, unlike the extreme allegorizers, did not consider the physical rite of circumcision to have been dissolved in deference to its signification.

Moreover, in posing his question in Rom 3:1, Paul does not inquire about the *past* value of circumcision or about the value of physical circumcision prior to the advent of Christ. Rather, he asks about its present value: What is the benefit/value of circumcision? He looks, moreover, to the past or initial example of Abraham precisely in order to make a case for the present. In other words, he suggests that nothing has actually changed - the original reason that Abraham was given circumcision is the same reason for its value today, namely, as a "sign" or a "seal" of the righteousness produced by faith.

6.2 Did Paul Consider Circumcision to Have Been Lifted as a Badge of Boasting? Was Paul Sent to All of the Gentiles?

As mentioned earlier, Dunn posits that Paul understood circumcision to have been lifted as “a badge of boasting.” It is true that both Paul (Gal 6:13, Phil 3:3) and, as mentioned earlier, Theodotus, suggest that circumcision was matter of boasting. There is, however, difficulty in considering circumcision to have been a Jewish boast over all Gentiles since Jews were not the only people to practice the rite.

Yet Dunn states that the Jews themselves regarded circumcision as a “distinctively Jewish” observance.⁴² Was this, however, actually the case? In terms of the biblical text, for example, Ezek 32, presents a catalogue of kings who are condemned to go down to the grave and lie with the uncircumcised. Although the prospect of lying with the uncircumcised is presented as a shame from the perspective of the Lord, it seems that, at least in some of the cases, the fate would have been considered one of ignominy to those being so threatened. This would suggest that the nations mentioned, such as Egypt and Edom, likewise considered circumcision as the ideal and uncircumcision as a shame.

Moreover, Jews in Paul’s period certainly recognized the wider practice of circumcision. Philo, for example, explains the practice of circumcision by certain nations (*QG* 15:12):

⁴² “When we set this alongside the Palestinian Judaism illuminated by Sanders, the reason for this becomes clear, we can see why just these observances were regarded as so distinctively Jewish. The Jews regarded themselves them in the same way!” Dunn, *The New Perspective on Paul*, 109.

And that it has pleased some to circumcise themselves through foresight of soul without any ill effect is plain, for not only the Jews but also the Egyptians, Arabs and Ethiopians and nearly all those who inhabit the southern regions near the torrid zone are circumcised. And that is the particular reason if not that in these places, especially in summer, the foreskin of the genitals, which is the skin that surrounds and covers (them), becomes inflamed and infected. But when this is cut off, by being laid bare (the penis) is restored, and the affliction is resisted and expelled. For this reason the nations which are in the northern regions and all those to whom has been allotted a portion in those regions of the earth which are windy are not circumcised. For in those region, as the heat of the sun is relaxed and diminished, so too is the disease which is produced by heat in the skin of the parts of the body. And a sure indication of the credibility of this matter one may find in the time (of year) then the disease is especially (strong); it never occurs in winter, and it thrives and flourishes when it comes in summer, for it loves, as it were, to spread in this season like fire. (Colson)

As may be seen, Philo actually highlights the observance of circumcision among others. As elsewhere, he cites the health benefits of the practice. In this case, he does so also in order to explain the particular geographic spread of the custom. He suggests, essentially, that those who practice circumcision are located in “the southern regions near the torrid zone,” climates that generate the types of physical problems alleviated through circumcision. Meanwhile, those in the “northern regions” less affected by such ailments do not likewise practice circumcision. Considering this spread of observance among various nations, it is worth questioning the basic assumption that Paul would have understood uncircumcision to serve as the general hallmark of “Gentile” nations.⁴³

What may be noted is that, in terms of Philo’s demographics is that Paul’s missionary work was mainly centered in the “northern regions,” that is, primarily

⁴³ Indeed, as may be recalled, Aristophanes, in *Plut.* 265, seems to present circumcision as the mark of a “vile barbarian.”

among the *uncircumcised* Gentile nations. Thus, when Paul says that the gospel of the “foreskinned” (Gal 2:7) was committed to him and that he was sent to the “Gentiles” (Gal 2:8) while Peter, James and John were sent to the “circumcision,” (Gal 2:8) it seems most likely that the term “Gentile,” in this case refers not broadly to Gentiles in general but rather, more specifically, to the *uncircumcised* Gentiles of the world.⁴⁴ In other words, the agreement made in Jerusalem was not that Paul would go to all of the Gentile nations while Peter would go only to the Jews but rather that Paul would go to the *uncircumcised* Gentile nations and Peter to those of the “circumcision” - that is, to the Jews but probably, in addition, to others who likewise practiced circumcision such as those in Samaria (see Acts 8:14-17). Such a division would, of course, trouble the particular division of labor and alignment of circumcision and uncircumcision respectively with the Gentiles and the Jew as understood by Gaston.

Dunn, however, also attempts to support the notion of Jewish boasting regarding circumcision through the following appeal:

From the broader context, provided for us by Greco-Roman literature of the period, we know that just these observances were widely regarded as characteristically and distinctively Jewish. Writers like Petronius, Plutarch, Tacitus and Juvenal took it for granted that, in particular, circumcision abstention from pork and the Sabbath, were observances which marked out the practitioners as Jews, as people who were very attracted to Jewish ways.⁴⁵

⁴⁴ In other words, it was not so much that circumcision was considered the quintessential hallmark of the Gentile but rather that the uncircumcised Gentile was considered the quintessential Gentile.

⁴⁵ Dunn, *The New Perspective on Paul*, 108-109.

Regarding these writers, it is true, for example, that Petronius presents circumcision as a hallmark of Jewish identity. However, as will be later discussed, the very scene that is cited in support of this point when more closely examined actually undoes any notion of Jewish exclusivity regarding the mark.

Also, as mentioned earlier, Massa's identity, despite his circumcision remains ambiguous. There is some hint in the scene, for example, that he had been orphaned. Trimalchio, another character in the scene, moreover, calls him a "Cappadocian" (*Sat.* 69). Massa, however, while sharing some Cappadocian features, does not quite fit the description of a Cappadocian slave.⁴⁶ Cappadocia, however, was known as a center for the slave trade. Thus, Massa may be understood as a "Cappadocian" in the sense that he had been sold through the Cappadocian slave market. Again various groups practiced circumcision. Thus, the exact origins of an orphaned slave who happened to be circumcised may have been difficult to ascertain.

Aside from these points regarding the reading of Petronius, the greater difficulty with Dunn's assessment is that all of the Greco-Roman writers he cites above are Latin. Meanwhile, as seen earlier, those writing in Greek, such as Diodorus and Strabo, seem to have associated circumcision, not primarily with the Jews, but rather with the Egyptians.

Did Paul, in any case, however, consider the commandment of circumcision to be a problem or boasting to be a problem? Arguably, it was not the commandment with which Paul had an issue but, rather, with the matter of boasting. Again, as discussed earlier, Paul, in Romans actually asserts that

⁴⁶ As found, for example, elsewhere in *Sat.* 63.

circumcision is of value, just as it was in the case of Abraham, not for the sake of boasting, but rather as sign or seal of the righteousness of faith. Moreover, inasmuch as he presents physical circumcision as an expression of faith, Paul does not dismiss the rite as a “work.”

6.3 Did Paul Understand Circumcision to be a Boundary Marker Intended to Distinguish the Jew from All Other Nations?

Paula Fredriksen, meanwhile, understands circumcision to have been ordained precisely in order to distinguish the Jews from the nations. This view, however, seems to entirely overlook the fact that the foundational command as found in Gen 17, concerned all of the male members of his house – that is, all of Abraham’s sons and male servants. These sons, that is, Ishmael, Isaac (including Isaac’s two sons Jacob and Esau) along with the sons of Keturah were all, moreover, to found their own unique nations. Thus, in terms of the biblical mandate, not one but several nations were commanded regarding circumcision. Circumcision is thus presented not as an exclusive sign of the Jewish *ethnos* but rather a sign given to the members of the entire house or household of Abraham.

Indeed, Josephus mentions the circumcision of Ishmael as well as the contemporary practice of circumcision among the Arabs (*A.J.* 1.193, 214). Philo too points to the circumcision of Ishmael (*QG* 3.6, *Sobr.* 8). Also, as discussed in the previous chapter, while the author of Jubilees considered the sons of Jacob alone to be holy, he specifically notes that Abraham commanded all of his sons to practice physical circumcision (*Jub.* 20.1-3.)

Furthermore, becoming circumcised did not necessarily mean that one “became a Jew” and thus forfeited Gentile identity. Although a parallel situation currently does not exist, as discussed, there were actually two entire nations, the Itureans and the Idumaeans, who had been conquered and were forced to undergo circumcision. While the fate of the Itureans at the time of Paul’s ministry is unclear, the Idumaeans still existed, even participating, according to Josephus’ account, in the First Revolt together with the Jewish rebels in an effort to defend the Temple (in which they also worshipped) and the city of Jerusalem from the Romans. Having retained their territorial boundaries, however, the Idumaeans also retained their corporate identity as Idumaeans, though they had been circumcised and had also become Jews. The Idumaeans were thus of dual identity – that is, both Idumaeans and Jewish.

Moreover, the practice of circumcision by other nations did not compromise the particular identity of the Jewish nation. This is, of course, because national identity, as with individual identity is not predicated upon the presence of a single feature. The point is well illustrated in a passage from the *Satyricon* referenced briefly in the previous chapter. In this particular scene (*Sat.* 102:13-14), Eumolpus, suggests that Encolpius and Giton escape from their enemies by staining their skin with ink and trying to pass as Ethiopian slaves. Giton, however responds with the following:

Oh! yes," said Giton, "and please circumcise us too, so that we look like Jews and bore our ears to imitate Arabians, and chalk our faces till Gaul takes us

for her own sons; as if this colour alone could alter our shapes, and it were not needed that many things act in unison to make a good lie on all accounts
(Heseltine)

Giton, making this statement seemingly in a tone of exasperated sarcasm, points out that while black skin color might be prominent feature of the Ethiopian, it is not the only one. There is no way that one can successfully “pass” as a member of a given group convincingly on the basis of a single feature alone. “Many things” must “act in unison” in order to create a convincing disguise. Thus, while, as noted earlier, the passage may present circumcision as a particular Jewish hallmark, the larger point actually is that a single hallmark is in no way sufficient - multiple factors must work together in order to create a particular identity.

Indeed, the mention of the Arabians does not seem incidental here since they would share the feature of circumcision as well. If however, as understood by Fredriksen along with Nanos, Stowers, Gaston and Gager, Paul understood circumcision to apply to Jews but not to the “Gentiles,” where would someone, for example, of Arab or Idumaeen descent fit? Is Paul to be understood as suggesting that Jews should maintain circumcision but that Arabs or Idumaeans, for example, should desist from the biblical command since they were not of Jewish descent? Did Paul, perhaps simply ignore this question or not think the matter through?

The very meaning of a ritual shifts, of course, depending upon whom it is thought to pertain. From what may be gathered, Paul, at least, does not seem to have considered circumcision to be of value only for those of the Jewish nation but rather all those of the household of Abraham in the sense of the household of faith.

This, of course, does not mean, however, that, he did not consider the Jewish people to be special. As discussed, he himself states that the advantage of the Jew is much in every way (Rom 3:2). According to Paul, there was, indeed, a unique privilege held by the Jew, not shared by others – this was not circumcision, however, but rather the receipt of the living oracles of God (Rom 3:2) that were passed down through the generations. While the knowledge itself was to be shared, the Jews had been the sole nation to maintain the oracles since their original receipt. This was a role that had been shared by no other nation.

6.4 Is There Any Eschatological Expectation of Circumcision of the Nations in the Hebrew Bible from which Paul Could Draw?

Fredriksen raises another point worthy of consideration. She, essentially, asks whether there is any biblical expectation, from which Paul could have drawn, that in the future, Gentile nations would observe circumcision. Fredriksen herself states that she could think of none.⁴⁷

There is, however, a verse, Isa. 52:1, which states that no “foreskinned or unclean” person would be able to enter Jerusalem. Some commentators understand the phrase to refer to foreign armies. This certainly fits the context of discussion of release from captivity. A similar verse, however, Ezek. 44:9 condemns the house of Israel for bringing strangers “uncircumcised in heart and uncircumcised in flesh” to pollute the sanctuary. Meanwhile, the latter chapters of Isaiah such as Isa. 56:7 and 66: 22-23 give the impression that the Temple would be considered an institution

⁴⁷ Fredriksen, “Judaism, the Circumcision of the Gentiles, and Apocalyptic Hope,” 246.

for all nations and that all flesh would be expected to come to Jerusalem and worship.

It is possible then, reading Isa 52:1, Ezek 44:9 and the latter chapters of Isaiah together, that Jews of Paul's time period may have expected that, ultimately, men from all nations would go up to Jerusalem circumcised both in heart and body to worship in unison at the Temple. With this in mind, it may be recalled that Paul cites Isa 52:5 to warn that the name of the God is blasphemed because of the Jew who boasts in the law and yet breaks it (Rom 2:23-4). He then goes on to begin his more explicit refutation of the notion of the intrinsic value of circumcision (Rom 2:25-29). It is certainly possible that Paul uses Isa 52:5 not only for the explicit point regarding the name of God but also in partial refutation of the particular use of Isa 52:1 in support of insistence on Gentile circumcision.

Indeed, Philo may indicate an expectation of the universal practice of circumcision. As discussed, Philo presents circumcision as having physical benefits. This points to a notion of circumcision as a commandment to be maintained not as a particular marker separating the Jewish people from all others but as one with general benefit for humanity. He also seems to draw upon verses that suggest Israel would or should serve as a light for other nations (such as Deut 4:6-8, Isa 49:6 and 60:3) as well as those which point to the law as a light (such as Ps 119:105 and Prov 6:23) in expressing an expectation that, once the Jewish nation's fortunes began to change, their laws would eclipse the laws of all other nations and each nation would discard their own laws for those maintained by the Jews.⁴⁸

⁴⁸Commenting on a festival held for the translation of the LXX on the island of

As discussed, Paul presents it as his express goal, along with that of the other apostles, to bring about the obedience of “all nations.” He seems, moreover, on the one hand, to have thought that a new era had begun. Thus, he speaks, for example, of the “revelation of the mystery” that had been kept secret since the world began (Rom 16:25).

At the same time, however, he also refers to the return of Christ and the transformation to come. He also asserts that Christ will ultimately reign over Israel and all the nations (Rom 15:1). Yet, it was, of course, readily and painfully apparent in Paul’s day that Jerusalem was not free from captivity as described in Isa 52:1 but, rather, was under Gentile Roman occupation. This is a point that the apostle himself seems to allude to in Gal 4:25. It seems likely, given his expectation of the return of Christ, that Paul would have expected the prophecies of Isa. 52:1 along with other unfulfilled biblical prophecies to be fulfilled at some future though perhaps not too distant time.

With this in mind, it may be suggested that Paul understood the period in which he was writing to be a kind of intermediate era. In this time, there were some who were being “called,” who would ultimately serve and reign with Christ after being bodily transformed into the likeness of Christ (1 Cor. 15:35-54). During the present time then, those entering in did so out of response to a special call, out of

Pharos, Philo, having mentioned the light of the LXX (seemingly as a link to that of the famous lighthouse at Pharos as well as to that mentioned), states the following: *Mos.* 41-44: “each nation would abandon its peculiar ways, and, throwing overboard their ancestral customs, turn to honouring our laws alone. For, when the brightness of their shining is accompanied by national prosperity, it will darken the light of the others as the risen sun darkens the stars.” (Colson) See also Zech 8:23.

volition and not subjugation. In the future, however, Paul claims that every knee would bow to the Lord (Rom 14:11, Phil 2:9-11). Given what has been argued here regarding Paul's assessment in Romans of physical circumcision as a mark of obedience, it may be assumed that Paul's eschatological expectation would be that, eventually, during the reign of Christ, the nations would be brought to obedience and the hearts and flesh of all men would be circumcised.

6.5 Does Paul See Two Different Sets of Laws Applying to the Jew/Gentile?

As mentioned, Tomson, Bockmuehl and Nanos all suggest that Paul understood the Gentiles to fall under the "Noahide laws" (or something akin to the Noahide laws). Yet, it is perhaps of note that at no point in his writings does Paul explicitly mention Noah. On the other hand, he specifically refers to Abraham, making a case in Romans and also, as will be seen, in Galatians, that Gentile men of faith are, in fact, wholly legitimate sons of Abraham.

Moreover, as has been discussed, throughout Romans Paul emphasizes the equal standing between the Jew and Gentile. He seems also to place the Gentile in the same legal framework as the Jew, that is, under a universal law expressed through the Ten Commandments.⁴⁹ Paul argues that since God shows no partiality (Rom 2:11, Deut 10:17) and, as articulated in the Shema, God is One (Rom 3:30, Deut 6:4-9), he will thus apply one standard and one method of justification equally for both Jews and Gentiles. Physical circumcision, though not a vehicle for justification,

⁴⁹ See John 7:22 which indicates that circumcision though Mosaic law was actually from the "fathers."

remains of value for both Jews and Gentiles, just as it was for Abraham as a sign of the righteousness of faith.

6.6 Does Paul Understand the Mosaic Law to Apply Differently to the Jew and the Gentile

According to Stowers, Paul treats both Jew and Gentile under the framework of the Mosaic law. Stowers, however, understands the Mosaic Law to apply *differently* to the Jew and the Gentile. Interestingly, Stowers likewise notes that the purpose clause in Rom 4:11 functions to indicate that the rite of physical circumcision itself made Abraham a father:

The Greek indicates a relation of purpose or result between Abraham's faithfulness signified in the covenant and his fatherhood, which in turn results in the justification of the Gentiles (11c) and the fatherhood of the Jews (12).⁵⁰

Stowers, however, skips over the mention of the "fore-skinned" which follows the purpose/result clause assuming the connection must be with those who are likewise physically circumcised. This move aids in Stowers' argument regarding two different laws for the Gentile and Jew.⁵¹ Unfortunately, however, the above

⁵⁰ Stowers, *Reading*, 243-244

⁵¹ In such a system, what should be done with the Gentile slave of a Jewish believer – should he be circumcised in concert with the Abrahamic command or remain uncircumcised because he, being Gentile, is exempt from the command?

reading overlooks the notion of Abraham as an exemplar and Paul's emphasis on Abraham as a father to both groups.

6.7 Could Sander's Notion of "Covenantal Nomism" Apply?

As previously discussed, Sanders characterizes Judaism of Paul's time as a religion that understood grace to be the sole means of "getting in" to the covenant and obedience as a condition of maintenance in the covenant. Sanders, however, also assumes, doubting McEleney, that circumcision was always required of the proselyte.⁵² As such, he does not seem to entertain the possibility that Paul's treatment of circumcision in relationship to the Gentiles might be restricted primarily to the question of the role of the rite as a means of "getting in." What is raised here and will be seen also in Galatians is that Paul is concerned with the way in which the Gentiles become sons of Abraham and thus, the way in which they *enter* the Abrahamic covenant. Although he objects to the idea of physical circumcision as an entrance requirement, he does not object to the rite *per se*. Paul, ironically, might thus be closer to Sander's conception of Judaism of the time than he himself considers. That is, Paul certainly understood grace as a covenantal entrance point, not circumcision (Rom 3:24; 5:15, 17). Yet obedience to the law, including physical circumcision remained, as a response to grace and as a fundamental outworking of faith (Rom 3:31).

⁵² Sanders, *Paul, the Law and the Jewish People*, 50.

6.8 What are the Implications for Staples' Reading?

As mentioned in the first chapter, Staples reads Rom 9 as pointing to the return of the exiles. As suggested by Staples, Paul may well have thought that some, many, or even most of those who were responding to the gospel were of Israelite descent. While there does indeed seem to be merit to Staples' reading, it might also be noted that in Rom 9:10-13, Paul explicitly refers to Esau (who is identified as Edom in Gen 36:1). Moreover, in Rom 11, Paul seems to be making specific use of Psalm 52 - a psalm in which David presents himself as an olive tree rebuffing the boasts of Doeg the Edomite.⁵³ Paul uses this verse in order to caution the Gentiles at Rome not to boast against the branches. Indeed, it may be noted that in later rabbinic literature, the Romans are considered and routinely represented as descendants of Esau or Edom. Is it possible then, that he understood some in his audience in Rome to also be of Edomite descent?

Ultimately, it seems lines of decent would have been of prophetic but not necessarily practical import for Paul. After all, though genealogical data might have existed,⁵⁴ it would not have been available in every case or sufficiently extensive. Nor was modern DNA testing possible. How then would it have been feasible to verify Israelite or other identity? Again, Paul throughout Romans as well as elsewhere emphasizes the equality between Jew and Gentile. Moreover, as mentioned earlier, Paul specifically quotes Gen 17:5 that Abraham's faith made him the father of many nations. In his view, faith and not physical descent was the key

⁵³ Gen 16:12, Hos 8:9, Acts 11:6.

⁵⁴ On the matter of genealogies see Titus 3:9.

factor in terms of an individual's access to the blessings of God and Abrahamic inheritance.

6.9 A Proposal: Two Groups – One Law w/Physical Circumcision Equally Applicable to Both Groups

As argued here, what Paul seems to be precisely highlighting in Rom 4:11-12 is that physical circumcision is not of value for the sake of justification, as a mark specifically designating the Jew from Gentile or anything else but rather as a seal of the righteousness produced by faith for anyone walking in faith, whether Jew or Gentile. In other words, he would have understood physical circumcision as being of value for the entire household of Abraham in the sense of the entire household of faith.

Paul does not, on the other hand, retain physical circumcision as a sign of Jewish ethnicity, as suggested by Segal, nor as a means of maintaining the boundary between Jews and the nations, as suggested by Fredricksen, nor as a matter of Jewish privilege, as suggested by Nanos, nor as a matter pertaining, in terms of the Mosaic law, to the Jew alone, as suggested by Stowers. Again Paul's emphasis is on the value or benefit of circumcision as an expression of faith, whether that faith is of a Jew or a Gentile.

7. Summary

Paul's point in Romans is that even the uncircumcised man who is not of Abrahamic lineage, who has faith in God, turns away from idolatry, does the law and is circumcised later in life has Abraham as his father in type on all these counts. His argument and particular use of the figure of Abraham seems to serve simultaneously as a corrective to those who are insisting on circumcision in his view, for the wrong reason (justification or righteous standing before God) as well as a rationale and an encouragement for those who might feel reluctant to become circumcised.

It is hoped that the present chapter has provided an alternate vista for the reading of Paul in Romans on the topic of circumcision. As discussed, Paul, in Romans, refutes the notion that it was necessary to undergo circumcision in order "become a Jew." As argued, Paul, together with others of his day (such as Philo of Alexandria) held that recognition of the God of Israel and observance of the laws were the most critical factor in crossing the boundary and taking on the title of "Jew." Although circumcision is one of the laws, it is not a constant or repeated performance but, rather, (in general) a singular act. The question, for those who had not been circumcised on the eighth day was at what point should the rite be performed.

From a reading of Romans, it may be gleaned that, in Paul's view, circumcision need not be performed immediately. As discussed, in Rom 4, he points out that since Abraham was justified *prior* to becoming physically circumcised, physical circumcision could not have served as the basis for Abraham's righteous

standing or justification before God. This does not mean, however, that Paul held physical circumcision to be of no value at all. He specifically states that the value of circumcision is “much in every way.” The question then becomes whether the value of circumcision to be only for the Jew or for the Gentile as well.

In consideration of the work of Philo and Paul’s own line of argumentation in Romans, it may be offered that Paul actually expected that an uncircumcised man who had already begun to “do”, “practice” or “guard/keep” the law would, eventually, just as Abraham himself, become physically circumcised – not for the sake of justification but, rather, as an outward sign or seal of the righteousness that they already possessed through faith. Indeed, close examination of Rom 4:12 suggests that, in Paul’s view, by becoming circumcised late in life, Abraham became the “father” of all those who were, likewise, circumcised later in life. On the other hand, Abraham served as father to those who had been circumcised (on the eighth day) but also who walked in the footsteps of the faith Abraham had prior to his circumcision. This element of faith, in Paul’s view is the basis for justification for both Jew and Gentile alike. Thus, following Paul’s line of argument, it seems that, in his view, physical circumcision served as a seal of righteousness equally for those Gentiles and Jews who walked in the faith of Abraham.

Of course, even if this reading might have some merit, it might not seem to cohere with Paul’s treatment of the topic of physical circumcision elsewhere in 1 Corinthians, Philippians and, particularly, in Galatians. As such, the next chapter will be devoted to investigation of these epistles to see whether or not Paul may

have a coherent or incoherent view on circumcision or whether, perhaps, he may have changed his view over time.

Chapter 4

Dealing with Objections: Galatians, Philippians, and 1 Corinthians

1. Introduction

It was argued, in the previous chapter, based on a reading of Rom 4, that Paul actually expected uncircumcised men who followed in the footsteps of Abraham to become, at some point, physically circumcised, just as their father Abraham had been. In Paul's view, physical circumcision is not a requirement in order to "become a Jew" or for justification or receipt of the inheritance promised to Abraham. It does have value, however, as an outward "seal" of the righteousness produced by faith and circumcision of the heart and as a reminder to keep walking in the obedient footsteps of the forefather. Even if, however, this proposition might be granted, anyone who paid attention to the writings of Paul might have queries or doubts regarding such a reading of Rom 4 in light of Paul's comments on physical circumcision elsewhere.

The purpose of the present chapter is to deal with various statements and arguments, found particularly in Paul's epistle to the Galatians but also in Phil 3:2 and likewise in 1 Cor 7:17-20, that would seem to contravene the above thesis. Specific questions to be addressed include the following: If Paul actually expected Gentiles to become physically circumcised, why does he specifically point out that Titus, a "Greek," had not been compelled to undergo the rite (Gal 2:3)? Why, in addition, does he recall his conflict with the apostle Peter; a confrontation in which he claims to have accused Peter of pressuring those in Antioch to "Judaize" and thus,

perhaps, to become circumcised (Gal 2:11-14)? Why, moreover, does Paul emphatically warn against “ending” in the flesh (Gal 3:3) – arguing that those who became physically circumcised would not gain any benefit from having undergone the rite but would be released by Christ (Gal 5:2, 4), become debtors to the entire law (Gal 5:3) and actually fall away from grace (Gal 5:4)? Why would he suggest, moreover, that circumcision is “nothing” (Gal 5:6, 6:15)?

To these may be added yet another question raised in Galatians as well as in Philippians: namely, if Paul actually values physical circumcision, why does he seem to treat the rite as form of mutilation (Gal 5:12, Phil 3:2)? Finally, if Paul expected uncircumcised believers in Christ to eventually become circumcised, why again does he claim that circumcision is “nothing,” specifically directing those in Corinth to *remain* uncircumcised (1 Cor 7:17-20)?

These are all valid and significant questions. The goal of the present chapter is to address these queries through attention to the nature of the theological issues at stake as well as the social and historical context of Paul’s communities.

Discussion will first center on Galatians with brief treatment of Phil 3:2. 1 Cor 7: 17-20 will be then addressed with some summary reflections offered at the end.

2. Galatians

2.1 Factors that Might Account for the Difference between Galatians and Romans

Paul, in Galatians, just as in his epistle to the Romans, certainly challenges the notion that circumcision is necessary for justification before God and inheritance of the promises given to Abraham. As in Romans, he places the basis for both squarely on faith and the crucified Christ. Nevertheless, Paul seems to exhibit a tone of greater distress and concern toward those in Galatia than toward those in Rome. Indeed, in contrast to Romans, Paul, in Galatians does not seem to affirm the value of circumcision. Rather, he seems to explicitly and emphatically oppose it! How might the differences between these two epistles be understood?

One way to account for possible discrepancies is to simply posit that Paul was not an especially coherent thinker or that he changed his mind over time. Prior to exploring or resorting to such a position however, it would seem worthwhile to venture at least the possibility that he *may* have had a consistent viewpoint.

To this end, there are several preliminary factors that may be offered for consideration. First, Paul seems to have been one of the very founding fathers of the Galatian community. In addition, although Paul seems to have personally known some of those in Rome, he had not, at the time of the writing of Romans, actually visited the congregation in Rome. He also expresses his desire to pay the community a first time visit (Rom 1.10). It is possible then that the harsher tone found in Galatians reflects, at least in part, both a greater degree of familiarity with the Galatian community and a sense of heightened responsibility toward them.

Furthermore, from a reading of Romans, one does not gather the sense that the uncircumcised men in Rome were actually lining up to become circumcised. It is, of course, possible, even perhaps likely, that *some* of the uncircumcised men in Rome had been seriously contemplating circumcision. They may, however, have been hesitant to undergo the rite due to cultural and other factors (see discussion in chapter 2). Others in Rome, however, having perhaps a robust or secure sense of their own position and identity,¹ may have been quite satisfied that circumcision was of no “benefit” or “value” for them. It is possible, however, that someone or some group was teaching that circumcision was necessary, particularly for justification as well as Abrahamic sonship and inheritance. Paul, in response, displays a kind of middle ground, arguing against the idea of circumcision as a requirement for “becoming a Jew” or son of Abraham and as a means of achieving justification (and, as briefly touched upon, salvation, spiritual perfection, etc...) while simultaneously asserting the value of circumcision as a physical seal of the righteousness produced by faith. Indeed, while Paul explains certain concepts and even to some degree reproves those in Rome, he commends the Romans for their world-renowned faith (Rom 1:8). If there were uncircumcised men in the community who were walking in the obedience of faith then, physical circumcision, in Paul’s view, would have had value for them.

On the other hand, Paul does not likewise commend the Galatians for their faith. Rather, he expresses concern that they had not yet been “formed” in Christ (Gal 4:19). Unlike those in Rome, it seems that those in Galatia were quite close,

¹ Which seems intimated by Paul in Rom 11:18.

even perhaps on the verge of undergoing the rite. That is, in contrast to the possible reluctance of the men in Rome to become circumcised, those in Galatia seem to have been troubled by the prospect but open to the idea of or willing to become circumcised (Gal 5:12). The example of Izates here comes to mind, since, at least in terms of the way Josephus relates the story, the king was anxious to become circumcised in order to secure his status as a Jew. The men of the Galatian communities seem to have been similarly concerned to undergo the rite motivated by a desire for the various benefits that they assumed would accrue thereby (justified standing before God, Abrahamic sonship, inheritance of the covenantal promises, etc...).

In Paul's eyes, this was a foundational error. While some in Rome might not have esteemed circumcision quite enough, the Galatians were putting far too much upon the rite. It seems they were actually placing their faith in the rite *itself* rather than God and Christ. This, in Paul's view, represented a fundamental spiritual crisis.

To some extent, as brought out by Elliott, the willingness on the part of the men of Galatia to become circumcised might be understood in terms of the Anatolian context of the community. Anatolia, after all, was the heart of the cult of the Mother Goddess, Cybele - a cult well known for the practice among its priests (the Galli) of ritual castration. Other Anatolian cults, such as that of Attis, also involved ritual castration.² Since the men of Galatia were perhaps, not only familiar with but also, comfortable (in a cultural sense!) with the idea of ritual castration, the idea of circumcision might not have seemed so offensive or repugnant to the men in

² Elliott, *Cutting Too Close for Comfort*, 94-158.

Galatia as to those in other regions or cities as such as Rome. It is not, of course, that these cults did not exist in Rome.³ Since, however, such cults were understood to be foreign, their cultural impact would have been of a different kind and order for those in Rome than in Galatia. (Moreover, even if the men in the community in Rome were not themselves of Latin heritage, they may have still been impacted by the larger cultural context.) Paul is thus more pressed to intervene in Galatia than in Rome.

In addition, as will be discussed, those in Galatia seem to have been under particular pressure to become circumcised. According to the well-known account in Acts 15, a meeting, referred to as the “Apostolic Council,” was convened during which it was agreed that circumcision was not to be considered a requirement or basis for “salvation” (see Acts 15:1-30). Although scholars may differ on the question of whether Galatians was written prior to the Council or afterward, they tend to treat the account in Acts 15 as reflective of a historical event. Meanwhile, it is generally held that Romans was penned following both the writing of Galatians as well as the Apostolic Council. If so, although the letter to the Galatians and the decision of the Council may not have completely resolved the matter in the minds of all, they may have helped to quell the pitch of the debate, at least in certain circles to some degree. Thus, Paul may have been addressing the Roman community during a period of relative theological calm regarding the topic of circumcision but to the

³ A temple to Cybele or Magna Mater, for example, had long stood on the Palatine.

Galatians during a period of particular tension regarding the matter⁴ (and, considering a pre-Council date of writing, without the added force of the voices of the Jerusalem-based apostles). It may be suggested then that for this and the aforementioned reasons, there is a somewhat different tone to Paul's discussion of circumcision in Galatians than in Romans.

As will be discussed, another possible difference is that those in Galatia had become convinced that *periah* rather than *milah* was the valid form of circumcision. Paul exhibits a greater degree of concern for those in Galatia than Rome not only because the Galatians were more directly under his sphere of care, but also because they were under greater pressure to become circumcised while, at the same time, more receptive to the idea of doing so and contemplating a type of circumcision of greater physical consequence.

2.2 Jerusalem - Compulsion and Circumcision (Gal 2:3)

As mentioned, one objection that may be raised to the present thesis is that according to Paul, Titus, while in Jerusalem, was not compelled by others to become circumcised (2:3). Paul, however, does not state that he had no expectation that Titus would, at some point, become circumcised or that Titus himself had absolutely no intention of ever becoming circumcised but that Titus had not been compelled by others to do so.⁵

⁴ See also Günther Bornkamm, *Paul* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995), 93-95.

⁵ See also F.F. Bruce, *The Epistle to the Galatians* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1982), 112. Bruce suggests two possibilities: 1) circumcision was not required at all, not even of Titus or 2) Titus was already circumcised but on "his own

With regard to this, it might be worth recalling that in terms of the biblical command in Ex 12:48, the *ger* who wished to participate in the Passover was to become circumcised with his entire household. The decision, however, to do so was left to the *ger* and not to the native-born Israelites. In addition, Josephus claims that, during his time of command in the Galilee, a group of Jewish men came to him demanding that two men from Trachonites, who had come seeking refuge in their region, needed to become circumcised as a condition of residence among them. Josephus, however, claims that he prevented this stating that he “ would not allow the men to be compelled to become circumcised and worship God against the dictates of the own conscience (*Vita* 113, Feldman).”

As mentioned earlier, Josephus himself, as may be gathered from the construction of the narrative of the King of Adiabene, presents circumcision as a rite that those wishing to worship the God of the Hebrews should undergo. This,

initiative (or on Paul’s).” Bruce favors the first scenario but leaves room for the second. His particular inclusion of Paul in the matter of “initiative” may be due to consideration of an episode found in Acts 16:3 in which Paul takes Timothy to be circumcised. Bruce explicitly considers this verse in a later discussion in his commentary (see Bruce, *Galatians*, 114). There, however, he intimates that the rationale for the difference in Paul’s stance toward Titus and Timothy is that Titus was a Greek while Timothy was of Jewish descent on his mother’s side. It is actually not clear, however, that Titus was a Gentile. He may, in fact, have been a “Greek” in the sense of being an uncircumcised Hellenistic Jew. Moreover, from Paul’s discussion in Galatians it would seem that Titus was not circumcised at the time of his visit with Paul to Jerusalem. As is argued above, there was an expectation that Titus would eventually become circumcised, not under compulsion but at a time determined by Titus himself (not by Paul or anyone else). While Paul is certainly portrayed in Acts 16:3 as playing a particular initiatory role in the circumcision of Timothy, the narrative does not preclude an assumption that Timothy himself had already expressed a desire or willingness to undergo the rite.

however, does not mean that he thought that individuals ought to be pressured or forced to do so against their will – even if living in Jewish territory.⁶

In light of the foregoing, it may be proposed that Paul, as with Josephus, in mentioning the situation with Titus, is not suggesting dismissal of the rite of circumcision but defending the importance of personal volition. In other words, his aim is not to reject the rite of circumcision itself but rather the pressure or demand for circumcision.⁷ Indeed, in terms of the previous discussion regarding Romans, it

⁶ The specific importance of undertaking circumcision on the basis of one's free will is evinced in rabbinic literature of a much later period. The following is found in *Pirke R. El.* 29:

Rabbi Jochanan said: All heathens who come to Israel are circumcised by their own freewill and with their consent, and in the fear of Heaven are they circumcised. We do not believe a proselyte until seven generations (have passed), so that the waters should not return to their source. (Friedlander)

In this passage, Rabbi Jochanan (Rabbi Jochanan ben Zakkai), a younger contemporary of Paul, is presented as requiring that any who "come to Israel" be circumcised of their "own free will." Of course, while elements of *Pirke R. El.* may be of first century provenance, the text is quite late. The passage does, however, serve to illustrate the notion that an individual should be circumcised of their own free will since those pressured or forced to become circumcised (or who, perhaps, choose to become circumcised for some reason other than the "fear of Heaven") may not continue with the on-going requirements of a Torah observant life but might return to their previous ways (that is, return to their "source"). As the continuation of the passage indicates, slaves, on the other hand, are circumcised with or without their consent.

⁷ As mentioned earlier, according to Josephus, the Itureans and the Idumaeans had been, respectively, compelled to undergo circumcision in order to stay in their lands. Also, although not all agree on the point, it may be argued that Horace, in *Satires* 1.8 depicts Jews in Rome in the 1st century BC as verbally pressuring others to become part of their group and undergo circumcision. The idea of pressure however is, of course, somewhat subjective. As discussed previously, Eliezer makes a formidable case to the King of Adiabene that he ought to be circumcised, intimating that he might incur God's wrath for continuing to postpone the rite. Of course, in terms of the narrative, it may be assumed that from the perspective of Eliezer, this was not a pressure tactic (particularly as the king was

may be suggested that Paul expected Titus to become circumcised (as a “seal” of the righteousness produced by his faith) not, however, according to the promptings and dictates of another but, eventually, at a time of Titus’ own readiness and personal choice.

Moreover, Paul seems to bring up the example of Titus precisely because the Galatians themselves were under pressure to become circumcised (6:12). Thus Paul’s message seems to be that if Titus had not been compelled to be circumcised while in the apostolic headquarters of the holy city of Jerusalem itself, the Galatians ought not be compelled to become circumcised either.

In the following sections, it will be argued that Paul’s objection was not only against the idea of putting pressure on others to become circumcised, but also to the root reasons why circumcision was being demanded of the Galatians.

inclined in this direction already) but a compassionate plea made to the king on the basis of facts.

2.3 Antioch – Compelling the Gentiles to Judaize (2:14)

After having mentioned his time with Titus in Jerusalem, Paul then goes on to claim that Peter withdrew from eating with Gentiles at Antioch fearing those “of the circumcision.”⁸ He then claims to have accused Peter of compelling the Gentiles in Antioch to “Judaize.”

εἰ σὺ Ἰουδαῖος ὑπάρχων ἐθνικῶς ‘καὶ οὐχὶ Ἰουδαϊκῶς ζῇς’, ὥπως τὰ
ἔθνη ἀναγκάζεις ἰουδαῖζειν;

If you, a Jew, live a Gentilic (an ethnic) life and not a Judaic life, how do you
compel the Gentiles to Judaize?

The meaning of the term “Judaize” here is a matter of debate. Ben Witherington, for example, states the following:

⁸ There is debate regarding the precise nature of the issues at stake regarding Peter’s separation from the Gentiles. Dunn, for example, understands the issue to concern levels of stricture regarding food. (See James Dunn, “The Incident at Antioch” in *The Galatians Debate* (ed. Mark Nanos; Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 2002), 199-234. Had levels of food observance, however, been an issue there would have been a simple solution: the less observant could have simply gone to eat in the homes of those more observant. Rather, it may be suggested that Peter capitulated to pressure from those “of the circumcision” and withdrew from table-fellowship with the uncircumcised men in Antioch precisely because they were uncircumcised. See also Philip F. Esler, “Making and Breaking an Agreement Mediterranean Style: A New Reading of Galatians 2:1-14,” *The Galatians Debate*, 261- 81. It may be further noted that, as seen earlier, Philo presents circumcision as a form of purification. A more specific case may thus be made that those “of the circumcision,” that is, those advocating circumcision, would have required the uncircumcised men to in Antioch to become circumcised for the sake of purity and thus for table-fellowship. While there is further support for this view, full discussion of this topic must be engaged elsewhere.

The word is a significant term which occurs nowhere else in the NT, meaning to adopt Jewish customs and practices, which would include Sabbath observance, observing food laws, and even being circumcised. In other words the term focuses on the orthopraxy of early Judaism.⁹

Cohen similarly understands the term to refer in Galatians to the adoption of a range of “any distinctively Jewish customs and manners.”¹⁰ Richard Longenecker, meanwhile, understands the term to more precisely mean: to “become a Jew.”¹¹ Since the way in which the term “Judaize” is understood has implications regarding the reading of Paul’s position regarding the circumcision of Gentiles here, it is necessary to examine the term and its usage in context more closely.

As mentioned by Witherington, the term ἰουδαῖζειν occurs in the NT only in Gal 2:14. Meanwhile, as argued earlier, Josephus seems to use the term ἰουδαῖσιν (in *B.J.* 2.454) to mean “to turn Jew” or “become a Jew” without circumcision. On the other hand, Josephus uses ἰουδαῖζοντας in *B.J.* 2.462-3 in describing those who had adopted Jewish customs but had not officially become Jews.¹² Plutarch, writing

⁹ Ben Witherington III, *Grace in Galatia* (Grand Rapids: T&T Clark, 1998), 159. See also Frank J. Matera, *Galatians* (Collegeville, Minn.: The Liturgical Press, 2007), 87.

¹⁰ Cohen, *Beginnings*, 182.

¹¹ Richard N. Longenecker, *Galatians* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1990), 78.

¹² Cohen, while considering a cultural meaning for ἰουδαῖζοντας, as in his reading of, ultimately prefers a political sense to the term. He essentially understands the term ἰουδαῖζοντας to refer to those who gave political support to the Jews. See *Beginnings*, 184-185. Why, however, would the Syrians, maintain traitors or suspected traitors in their midst? Although translations of *B.J.* 2.462-3 convey the sense that the “judaizers” remained unmolested by the Syrians, it may be

in the early second century CE, actually uses the term ἰουδαΐζειν but the meaning there, unfortunately, is not entirely clear.¹³

2.3.1 To Judaize?

Given the foregoing, evaluation of context is crucial in ascertaining Paul's usage of ἰουδαΐζειν. To that end it may be noted that, in Gal 2:13, Paul seems to contrast a "Gentilic life" with a "Judaic" Life. He thus seems to be suggesting that Peter is living the life of a Gentile but compelling the Gentiles to live as Jews. Yet, in the very next verse (2:15), Paul goes on to seemingly contrast Jews with "sinners from out of the Gentiles." If sinners come from among the Gentiles, however, and Peter had been living like a "Gentile" prior to the arrival of the men from James, was

noted that the word ἔιχον found in *B.J.* 2.462-3 may be taken to mean "yielded up." If so, the passage would read in precisely the opposite way. Namely, it would suggest that the Syrians actually "yielded up" the "judaizers." Such a rendering would fit much better with the general sense of the passage itself which refers to a period of conflict between Jews and Syrians during which a general climate of fear and suspicion prevailed and each group, out of fear of attack, made preemptive strikes against the other. The Syrians thus, "yielded up" or "gave up" the "judaizers," presumably to be killed, precisely because they did not trust that individuals who practiced Jewish customs would be completely loyal to the Syrian camp. Although a religious or cultural sense to ἰουδαΐζοντας remains preferable, such a reading would seem to bolster Cohen's preference for a political sense.

¹³ Plutarch suggest in *Cic.* 7.6 that a certain Caecilius had been liable for judaizing (ἐνόχος τῷ ἰουδαΐζειν). Plutarch relates this detail in the course of explaining a witty saying he claims to have been made by the famous Latin orator, Cicero during the prosecution of Verres. At the time, the inhabitants of Sicily had accused Verres of various crimes. Caecilius, however, was a friend of Verres had wanted to accuse Verres himself in order to facilitate a more lenient sentence. Plutarch relates that, in light of this, Cicero, playing on the name Verres (which, in Latin, means "castrated pig") said to Caecilius: "What does a Jew have to do with a pig?" The assumption may have been here that Caecilius was actually a Jewish proselyte or that Cicero was merely making fun of him because of his Jewish tendencies.

Paul somehow suggesting that Peter, prior to the visit of these men, had actually been living a sinful Gentile life? If so, one might expect Paul to have offered a somewhat different and perhaps even heavier castigation of Peter!

Rather, in order to understand Paul's charge, it should be noted that although the term ἔθνος is sometimes used for "Gentile," it is often translated simply as "people" or "nation," even, as may be found in the LXX, in specific reference to the nation of Israel.¹⁴ Also it may be noted that in Acts 2:5, Jews from the diaspora are said to hail from every "nation" (ἔθνους) under heaven. Moreover, as discussed earlier, there seem to have been differences in interpretations of the scripture and law between those living in diaspora communities (as, for example, in Philo's city of Alexandria) and those living in the Galilee and Judea.

It is quite possible then that in referring to a "Gentilic" or "ethnic" life (ὑπάρχων ἐθνικῶς) Paul does not mean to suggest that Peter had been living the general lifestyle of the "Gentiles" and certainly not that of "sinners" but rather the lifestyle more characteristic of Jews among the nations, that is, Jews of the diaspora. Paul's use of ἰουδαῖζειν in this context thus means "to become Jews" or "to live a Jewish life" in terms of the particular interpretation of the law held by Jews in Judea. Indeed, Paul notes that the men to whom Peter deferred came "from James" (Gal 2:12). Since James was one of the Jerusalem-based apostles, the men would, presumably, have hailed from Jerusalem or its environs, namely, Judea.¹⁵

Again, as argued in the previous chapters, there were different understandings of how to become a Jew in antiquity. Thus, for example, Paul, in

¹⁴ See, for example, LXX Ex 19:6, Deut 26:5, 2 Chron 17:21.

¹⁵ Arguably, they did come to Antioch from Judea (see Acts 14:26-15:1).

Romans, seems to consider those who are circumcised in the heart to *already* be Jews.¹⁶ That is, he understood uncircumcised men who had faith in God and walked in the obedience and footsteps of Abraham to have already become Jews in a spiritual sense.

Paul's problem with Peter is not that he is pressuring the men in Antioch to become Jews. What was problematic for him is that the uncircumcised believers would be pressured to become subject to particular *Judean* theology and halacha. In other words, what Paul is claiming to have said to Peter is, in effect, something akin to the following: "In submitting to the demands of these men from James (Judea), including circumcision, you are compelling the Gentiles to *Judaize* (or "Judeanize") and to thus follow an even stricter interpretation of the law than we ourselves, who are Jews and certainly not "Gentile sinners," observe!"

2.3.2 Days, Months, Seasons and Years

Of course, later in the letter Paul expresses astonishment that the Galatians are observing "days, months seasons and years" (Gal 4:8-11):

Ἀλλὰ τότε μὲν οὐκ εἰδότες θεὸν ἐδουλεύσατε τοῖς φύσει μὴ οὖσιν
θεοῖς· 9 νῦν δὲ γνόντες θεόν, μᾶλλον δὲ γνωσθέντες ὑπὸ θεοῦ, πῶς
ἐπιστρέφετε πάλιν ἐπὶ τὰ ἀσθενή καὶ πτωχὰ στοιχεῖα οἷς πάλιν
ἄνωθεν ἔδουλεύειν θέλετε; 10 ἡμέρας παρατηρεῖσθε καὶ μῆνας καὶ

¹⁶ Indeed, those in Antioch from whom Peter withdrew might have included or even primarily been uncircumcised Jews.

καιροὺς καὶ ἐνιαυτούς, 11 φοβοῦμαι ὑμᾶς μή πως εἰκῇ ἤκεκοπίακα εἰς ὑμᾶς.

But then, when you did not know God, you served those that by nature are not gods. But now, knowing God or rather, having been known by God, how do you turn back again to the weak and beggarly elements that you wish to serve once again. You are observing days and months and seasons and years. I am afraid for you lest I have somehow labored for you in vain.

Paul's mention of "days and months and seasons and years" is often taken as an indication that the Galatians have adopted the Sabbath and festivals. Thus, for example, Frank Matera states the following:

The mention of days, months, festal seasons, and years undoubtedly refers to calendar observances of the Law required of those who accept circumcision; e.g., Sabbaths, new moons, and annual feasts.¹⁷

As may be seen, Matera understands Paul's mention of "days and months and seasons and years" to be a reference to the "Sabbaths, new moons and annual feasts." He then, in turn, understands acceptance of the Sabbaths, new moons and annual feasts as an indication of what it means to "Judaize."¹⁸

¹⁷ Matera, *Galatians*, 87 and 157.

¹⁸ Matera, *Galatians*, 87.

Yet the particular formulation that Paul uses in Gal 4:9-11 does not quite fit the terminology used in reference to the Sabbath and biblical festivals prescribed in Leviticus 23. If Paul meant “Sabbaths, new moons, and annual feasts” here why did he not simply use these particular terms as is found in Col 2:16?¹⁹ In addition, why would Paul call the festivals “weak and beggarly” when he refers to the festivals and uses the language of the festivals didactically in his own epistles, seemingly even in the epistle to the Galatians itself?²⁰

What might be noted is that, in Gal 4:8-11, Paul seems to treat the observance of “days and months and seasons and years” as though it represented a return to “those that by nature are not gods.” In other words, from the context, Paul seems to be expressing dismay that the Galatians are returning to their previous cultic calendar or astrological practices.²¹ Alternately, they may have been returning to

¹⁹ Also, what does Paul mean by the observance of “years”? Were the Galatians somehow been participating in the *shmitah* and *yovel* or jubilee years? Even if these particular years (which arise in the 7th and 49th or 50th years respectively) had somehow recently passed, their observance involved agricultural and inheritance matters related specifically to the land of Israel.

²⁰ In Gal 5:9 Paul states that “a little leaven leavens the whole lump.” Leaven, of course, is to be removed during the biblical festival season of Passover and Unleavened Bread. Paul uses the same phrase in reference to Passover in 1 Cor 5:6-8. In addition, the Book of Acts suggests that Paul attended the synagogues on the Sabbath and made pilgrimage to Jerusalem for the festivals.

²¹ Philo specifically equates τὰ στοιχεῖα in the *Contempl.* 3 with deities in the Greek pantheon. “Can we compare those who revere the elements (τὰ στοιχεῖα), earth, water, air, fire, which have received different names from different peoples who call fire Hephaestus because it is kindled, air Hera because it is lifted up and exalted on high, water Poseidon perhaps because it is drunk, and earth Demeter because it appears to be the mother of all plants and animals?” (Colson). Paul in 1 Cor 10:19-20, meanwhile, suggests that (idol) gods were, in fact, demonic powers. See also, Eduard Schweizer, “Slaves of the Elements and Worshippers of Angels: Gal 4:3, 9 and Col 2:8, 18, 20,” *JBL* 170 (1988), 455-468.

their old calendrical practices, not in honor of the previous gods and/or goddesses they had worshipped, but rather in honor of the new deity that they recognized.

While these seem the most likely options, it is also possible that the Galatians had adopted Jewish astrological observances. If the latter, the Galatians, by virtue of staying within the realm of Jewish practice, may not have considered themselves to be turning back to their former worship. For Paul, however, whether Jewish or Gentile, the practice of astrology would have constituted the same slavery under the “elements.”²²

In other words, the Galatians on the one hand, were ready to become circumcised. On the other, they were returning to the observance of “days and months and seasons and years.” The impulse in both cases, however, was to secure or control their own present state and future destiny through “works.” In Paul’s view, however, by so doing, and not grounding themselves in faith, the Galatians were losing the secure and free standing that they previously had in Christ and were actually becoming slaves, debtors or beggars again (Gal 4:9, 5:1).²³ Paul thus expresses dismay that he may have labored for them in vain (Gal 4:11)!

²² See also discussion by Troy Martin, “Pagan and Judeo-Christian Time-Keeping Schemes in Gal 4.10 and Col 2.16,” *NTS* (1996), 105-119. Martin also leaves open the possibility of a return to Jewish time-keeping schemes but likewise favors the notion that the Galatians are returning to pagan calendrical observances. See Martin, “Time-Keeping,” 105-119.

²³ Several texts found among the Dead Sea Scrolls (extant, therefore, in Paul’s time) contain particular Jewish astrological references. 4QCryptic, for example, refers specifically to the month and sign of the bull (Taurus). The text seems to suggest that the time of one’s birth will determine both the shape of the physical body as well as the degree to which one’s spirit will reside in the “house of light” and how much “in the house of darkness.” The text also refers to “impurity.” Another astrological text, 4Q318, contains reflections on zodiacal names. Meanwhile, of perhaps greater relevance to the Galatians, 4QBrontologion (4Q318), seems to

2.4 Bewitched by Accepting the Teachings of those who Advocated Circumcision (Gal 3:1)

Although Paul does not explicitly mention circumcision in chapter 3, the discourse that runs throughout the chapter may be understood as Paul's response to the Galatians acceptance of the need to undergo the rite.

For example, in verse 1, Paul asks a somewhat stunning question:

ὦ ἄνόητοι Γαλάται, τίς ὑμᾶς ἐβάσκανεν^τ, οἷς κατ' ὀφθαλμοὺς
Ἰησοῦς Χριστὸς προεγράφη ^τ ἐσταυρωμένος;

O foolish Galatians! Who has bewitched you before whose eyes Christ Jesus
as been publically announced as crucified?

The mention of the “eyes” here certainly brings up the notion of the evil eye by which one might become bewitched. Moreover, it may be noted that, in terms of material culture of the Greco-Roman world, apotropaic devices intended to ward off evil or the evil-eye were a commonplace. Some of these were phallic in nature.²⁴ Of course, as discussed earlier, sources in both Greek and Latin indicate that

indicate a merging of festival worship with astrological observances. As has been well discussed, numerous synagogues of later periods include striking floor mosaics of the zodiac, clearly indicating not only the 12 zodiacal months but also the 4 seasons together with depictions of the Temple and elements associated with festival worship. 4Q Cryptic is written from right to left while certain zodiacal names on the synagogue floors are written backwards. That Jews merged festival worship with astrological practice may be attested for both the period during and after Paul's time. While it is certainly possible that Jews inhabiting or visiting Galatia during this particular window of time may, perhaps, have been uninterested in or scrupulous in avoiding any type of astrological observances, it is at least plausible, if not likely, that some, at least, did engage in such practices.

²⁴ For discussion of such apotropaic devices see Craig A. Williams, *Roman Homosexuality* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 100.

circumcision was treated in the context of critique of superstitious practice.

Moreover, the *periah* circumcised phallus resembles an erect phallus in that, in both cases, the entire glans is exposed. What Paul seems thus to be suggesting is that the Galatians have become convinced that the circumcised phallus would serve them just as would a fascinum, a tintinnabulum, herm, etc.... – that is, as any manner of phallic or ithyphallic apotropaic device or talisman against evil or the evil eye.²⁵

What Paul seems to be claiming, however, is that in accepting such a notion, the Galatians had actually been bewitched. Precisely the calamity they had feared had come upon them through the very means by which they had tried to avoid it. They were looking toward circumcision or, more specifically, the circumcised phallus rather than to the image that Paul had presented to them of Christ crucified for their sense of security. Through the utter humiliation of the cross, Christ had become a fool for them.²⁶ In rejecting the crucified Christ, however, and turn to trust in their own circumcised phalluses, the Galatians, however, had become the fools – not for Christ but for their own members.

²⁵ There also seems to be merit to the argument presented by Susan Eastman that Paul is referring here to one of the Deuteronomic curses (found in Deut. 28.53-57) for disobedience to the law. This curse warns that a father, during the siege of a city, would “cast the evil eye” on his brother, wife and remaining children, not desiring to give them any of the flesh of his own children that he himself was eating. See Susan Eastman, “The Evil Eye and the Curse of the Law: Galatians 3:1 Revisited” *JSNT* (2001), 69-87.

²⁶ See L.L. Welborn, *Paul, the Fool of Christ: A Study of 1 Corinthians 1-4 in the Comic-Philosophic Tradition* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark: 2005).

2.5 Circumcision as Ending/Becoming Perfected in the Flesh (Gal 3:1-9; 5:16-26)

Having just expressed his dismay that the Galatians had been “bewitched,” Paul then asks whether they, having begun in the spirit, were now “ending in the flesh” (3:3). On one level, this certainly does seem to be a rhetorical warning against becoming circumcised in the flesh. Indeed, if so, the verse would seem to actually militate against the reading, presented in the previous chapter, of circumcision as a “seal” (understanding a “seal” to represent a kind of “end”) to be taken later in life. The question is, however, what does Paul exactly mean here by “ending in the flesh.” Why, moreover, if he valued the rite, might Paul have been warning the Galatians *against* becoming physically circumcised?

First, it may be noted that there are different ways to take the word ἐπιτελεῖσθε in 3:3. The term may be used in the sense of “ending,” but also in the sense of heading towards perfection or completion. In other words, Paul may be suggesting that the Galatians were “ending” in the flesh not only in seeking to become justified by circumcision but also by seeking to become finished, completed or perfected in the flesh.

The entry in BDAG has the following:

Either as mid.: *you have begun in the Spirit; will you now end in the flesh?* or, less prob., as pass. *will you be made complete in the flesh?*

Although the editors of BDAG here seem to express doubt regarding the second reading, the notion of being made complete would comport with Gen 17:1 and later

rabbinic understanding of the biblical verse. Gen 17:1, the verse which prefaces God's introduction to Abraham of the command regarding circumcision reads as follows: "Walk before me and be perfect."²⁷ Due to its placement at the head of the chapter in which circumcision is commanded, the Rabbis interpreted the rite of circumcision as a means of becoming complete or perfect.²⁸

Those who had been insisting on circumcision could certainly have likewise turned to Gen 17:1 in order to make a case that in order to become "perfect," like Abraham, it was necessary to become circumcised. It seems that in light of such a teaching, the Galatians, instead of exercising faith in God for their justification and completion or perfection (as Abraham had), were seeking to achieve spiritual completion, wholeness or perfection through the rite of physical circumcision itself. Paul's point is that this is an entirely misplaced motive for seeking circumcision.

Of course, another sense of "ending" seems intended as well. First, it may be noted that in the previous verse, Gal 3:2, Paul reminds the Galatians that they had first received the spirit and miracles not through "works of the law" but through the "hearing of faith." Then, in verse 6, just as he does in Rom 4, Paul makes use of Gen 15:6: "Thus Abraham 'believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness'." Again, his point is that Abraham was justified or reckoned righteous *prior* to becoming circumcised on the basis of his *faith*. Paul thus reminds the Galatians, through appeal through their own experience as well as scripture that physical

²⁷ Here pointing more to the sense of תָּמִיד ("complete," "whole," "perfect") in MT text than ἄμεμπτος ("blameless" although "perfect" is also suggested by this term) in the LXX.

²⁸ See, for example, *Gen Rab* 9.6 and *Num Rab* 12.8.

circumcision was not the basis for their receipt of the spirit, for spiritual perfection, righteousness or justification. Just as he does later in Romans, Paul asserts that those of faith are the sons of Abraham (Gal 3:7). He highlights thereby that faith and not physical circumcision is required for Abrahamic sonship.

The crucial difference then, between Paul's discussion in Gal 3 and Rom 4 is that in Rom 4, Paul implies that Abraham's physical circumcision has value as a seal of the righteousness produced by faith not only because Abraham *began* with faith but also because he *continued* to walk in faith. In marked contrast to this, Paul indicates in Gal 3 that the Galatians were *no longer* walking in faith. It seems that, instead of continuing to trust in God, they had become convinced that the rite of circumcision was necessary for justification. The Galatians were, in other words, "ending in the flesh" in the sense of placing their faith in physical circumcision and, in this manner, trusting in their own flesh instead of in God. This represented, however, a negation of the very purpose of circumcision as a sign or seal of the righteousness or justification produced not by the rite of circumcision itself but rather by faith in God.

Moreover, Paul seems to indicate that, although they first obtained the spirit through the "hearing of faith" (Gal 3:2), since they were now switching and placing faith for their justification and perfection in the rite of circumcision, the Galatians would actually no longer be able to "walk" (as Abraham did) in the spirit (Gal 5:16). In other words, Paul warns the Galatians that placing faith in their own circumcised flesh would result in "ending in the flesh" in the sense of fulfilling²⁹ the "desires of

²⁹ See also Paul's use of τελέσητε. in Gal 5:16.

the flesh” (Gal 5:16) such as “adultery, fornication, uncleanness, lewdness,” etc...(Gal 5:19-21).

Indeed, it seems likely that, in addition to an appeal to Gen 17:1, those teaching the necessity of circumcision also argued, as does Philo, that physical circumcision was necessary for salvation precisely because it curbed male physical pleasure and therefore sin. Paul, in Gal 5: 24, however, seems to understand the “passions” of the flesh as rooted in the “desires of the flesh” (Gal 5:16) and not the physical body. That is, Paul speaks of the “flesh” in the sense of the flesh nature that is opposed to the “spirit.” With regard to this point, it is of interest that Epictetus in referencing the Galli³⁰ (who, although eunuchs, were known for sexual license) states the following:

even those who are deprived of their genital members are not able to deprive themselves of man's desires. (Long, *Disc.* 2.20.20)

In other words, Epictetus, like Paul, does not see the removal of physical flesh as effective in curtailing desire.

Paul, moreover, seems to imply that those who fulfill the “desires of the flesh” (Gal 5:16) would not “inherit the kingdom of God” (Gal 5:21). He does not exactly explain in Galatians what inheriting the kingdom involves. In 1 Cor 15:50-53, however, he indicates that “flesh and blood” cannot inherit the kingdom of God; only

³⁰ In the course of leveling a critique of Epicurus.

those transformed at the resurrection into spiritual bodies (as also seemingly alluded to in Gal 3:27) are able to do so.

What Paul seems to be suggesting, therefore, is that the Galatians are heading for a fatal domino effect: The result of “ending in the flesh” (Gal 3: 3) in the sense of trusting in physical circumcision for justification and spiritual perfection would be “ending in the flesh” in the sense of fulfilling the “desires of the flesh” (Gal 5:16) through the committing of sins such adultery, fornication, uncleanness, lewdness, etc...(Gal 5:19-21). This, in turn, would result in “ending in the flesh” in the sense of being excluded from participation in the transformation of those in Christ from bodies of “flesh” into bodies of spirit at the resurrection (1 Cor 15:50 -53) and, therefore, ultimately, from inheritance of the kingdom of God. In making this case, Paul is not refuting the value of the rite of circumcision but rather the particular transformative power imputed to the rite by others.

Later in the letter, in Gal 5:16-26, Paul encourages the Galatians to “walk” in the “spirit.” He claims, moreover, that the “fruit” of the spirit includes “love, joy, peace, kindness, etc...” and that against such “there is no law” (Gal 5:22). While Philo and others may have argued that physical circumcision was necessary to curb the passions of the body, Paul points to walking in the Spirit and belonging to Christ as the only way to properly “crucify the passions and desires of the flesh” (Gal 5:16, 24). Paul’s assertion is not directed against the rite of circumcision itself but against the notion that physical circumcision is necessary in order to control the passions and desires of the flesh.

2.6 The Inability of Circumcision to Counter the Curse of the Law (Gal 3:8-14)

As previously mentioned with regard to Romans, those advocating obedience to the law as a basis for justification and blessing could have highlighted passages such as Deut 28:1-13 in order to make a case that observance to the Mosaic law would result in blessing. The blessings recorded in the Mosaic law seem designated, however, primarily for Israel. Paul, on the other hand, signals that the blessing to the *nations* came through Abraham (Gal 3:8-9).

He also indicates that the Mosaic covenant has a negative side. Specifically, he reminds the Galatians that the law *also* mandates curses for disobedience – the ultimate curse being death. To do so, he first quotes Deut 27:26, a verse that stipulates that those who do not observe *all* of the precepts of the law are under a curse.³¹ Paul's accent seems to be on the totality of the obligation – one must observe all, not just a select few or even the majority of the precepts.³²

He then suggests in Gal 3:13 that:

³¹ See also Deut 28:15-68.

³² See also Hans Hübner, *Law in Paul's Thought*, 19. Dunn, on the other hand, suggests that "there is no hint in Deut. xxvii,26 or in Paul's use of it that the obedience called for is impossible" (James Dunn, *The Epistle to the Galatians* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 1993), 171). Dunn argues, rather, that by the phrase "those who rely on the works of the law," Paul signifies those who "were putting too much weight on the distinctiveness of Jews from Gentiles, and on the special laws which formed the boundary mark between them" (Dunn, *Galatians*, 172). In Gal 3:10, however, Paul seems to highlight an existential problem – namely that, in order to avoid the curse, it is necessary to "do" (ποιῆσαι) "all" (πάντα) the things written in the book of the law" (not merely to avoid undo emphasis on some of the things written in the book of the law).

Χριστὸς ἡμᾶς ἐξηγόρασεν ἐκ τῆς κατάρας τοῦ νόμου γενόμενος ὑπὲρ ἡμῶν κατάρα, ὅτι γέγραπται ἐπικατάρατος πᾶς ὁ κρεμώμενος ἐπὶ ξύλου,

Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law, having become a curse for us – for it is written, “Cursed be everyone who hangs on a tree”

Deut 28:15-68 lists various curses that would result if the law was not performed - the ultimate curse being destruction (Deut 28:61,63). Paul seems, however, to equate the curse mentioned in Deut 27:26 with the specific penalty given to the rebellious son in Deut 21:23 – namely, death by hanging on a tree.³³ Although Paul’s phrase “curse of the law” is sometimes understood to mean that the law itself is a curse,³⁴ such a reading would certainly contradict Paul’s statement in Rom 7:12, in which Paul declares that the law is “holy” and the commandment “good.” Paul, however, is not stating here in Gal 3:13 that the law itself is a curse. The “curse” (τῆς κατάρας) serves as an object of the genitive of possession τοῦ νόμου (“of the law”)– thus, “the curse belonging to the law” or “the law’s curse.” What Paul seems to be suggesting then is not that the law itself is a curse but that a penalty or curse is incurred once the law is broken – that curse, specifically, is death.

It may be noted, moreover, that Paul has already referred to God as Father (Gal 1:1, 3). In citing Deut 21:23, Paul seems to suggest that those who break the law are rebellious sons to their Father. Ultimately, therefore, they merit the curse or

³³ See also William Baird, “Abraham in the New Testament,” *Interpretation* 42 (1988), 374-5.

³⁴ For mention of this particular reading see Betz, *Galatians*, 170.

penalty assigned to the rebellious son - that is, death on a tree. Once transgression has taken place, moreover, there is no way out of the situation - circumcision and perfect obedience to the law (were it possible) cannot cancel the penalty already incurred. The *only* way to escape this penalty of death and thus to “live” (Gal 3:11; Hab 2:4) is to accept, through faith, the substitutionary death of the God’s obedient son (Gal 1:4), Christ, who died on the tree (Gal 3:13).

2.7 Physical Circumcision and Observance of the Law are not Requirements for Receipt of the Blessings and Inheritance Promised to Abraham (Gal 3:14-18)

In Gal 3:14-18 Paul emphasizes that the blessings and inheritance of Abrahamic covenant is through Christ alone. Again, Paul’s argument would seem to represent a counter to the notion that circumcision and observance of the law was required for receipt of the blessings and inheritance promised to Abraham. Paul’s proof again relies on the matter of timing. In this case, he indicates that Abraham received the promises well *prior* to the giving of the Mosaic law. The law, therefore, having come later, could not annul the previous covenant made with Abraham (Gal 3:17).

2.8 Baptism, not Circumcision, is the Proper Rite of Entry into the Community of Christ (Gal 3:27-28)

In Gal 3:27-28 Paul goes on as follows:

27 ὅσοι γὰρ εἰς Χριστὸν ἐβαπτίσθητε, Χριστὸν ἐνεδύσασθε.

28 οὐκ ἔνι Ἰουδαῖος οὐδὲ Ἑλλήν, οὐκ ἔνι δοῦλος οὐδὲ ἐλεύθερος, οὐκ ἔνι ἄρσεν καὶ θήλυ· ἅπαντες γὰρ ὑμεῖς ἑῖς ἐστε ἐν Χριστῷ Ἰησοῦ.

27 For as many of you have been baptized into Christ have put on Christ. 28

For there is neither Jew nor Greek; there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male and female for you are all one in Christ Jesus.

Troy Martin argues that Paul, in these verses, is still dealing with the topic of circumcision. Noting the specifications of the covenant of circumcision as articulated in Gen 17:9-14, Martin comments on the verse as follows:

The covenant of circumcision distinguishes between Jew and Greek, slave and free, male and female. In these antithetical pairs, those described by the first member of the pair have an obligation to be circumcised in the Jewish community while those described by the second member do not...Christian baptism ignores the distinctions required by the covenant of circumcision and provides a basis for unity in the Christian community...Baptism does not abolish such distinctions but treats them as irrelevant for entrance into the community of faith.³⁵

Martin thus understands Paul to be explaining the dissolution of the commandment regarding circumcision and maintenance of baptism. As argued in chapter 2, however, in Paul's time, the necessity of circumcision as an initial rite for conversion

³⁵ Troy Martin, "The Covenant of Circumcision (Genesis 17:9-14) and the Situational Antitheses in Galatians 3:28," *JBL* (2003), 121.

was debated. Thus, a case may be offered that Paul, in Gal 3:27, is not suggesting that circumcision is no longer expected but, more specifically, that it is not necessary for initial *entrance* into the community of faith. In Paul's view, faith is the only requirement and baptism the only appropriate initiatory rite into the body of Christ.

2.9 Both Ishmael and Isaac were Circumcised yet only Isaac was to Receive the Promised Inheritance (Gal 4:22-31)

Later, in 4:22 Paul goes on to remind his audience that Abraham had two sons, one by the bondwoman and one by the free and that the former was born according to the flesh while the latter through a promise. Although he does not make the case explicitly, he may have taken it to be understood that both sons had been circumcised. Physical circumcision thus was not the critical factor in terms of the receipt of the inheritance. He then explains that the Galatians were, like Isaac, sons of promise (4:28). He seems to imply, meanwhile, that those who were troubling the Galatians by insisting on circumcision (4:29, 5:12) were themselves, like Ishmael, actually sons of bondage (4:25). As will be seen, in the next chapter, Paul emphasizes that, in order to remain with Isaac and not be cast out like Ishmael, the Galatians must not submit to the yoke of slavery or bondage by becoming circumcised.

2.10 Does Becoming Circumcised Mean that One is Bound (has Become a Debtor) to Keep the Whole Law and has thus Fallen Away from Grace? (Gal 4:21-26)

Paul's charge regarding the predicament of the Galatians picks up momentum in the first few verses of Galatians 5. He has already laid out the two different covenants – one of the promise and one of the law. Now he more directly presents the two options available and the consequences of choosing one or the other:

1. Τῇ ἐλευθερίᾳ ἡμᾶς Χριστὸς ἠλευθέρωσεν· στήκετε οὖν· καὶ μὴ πάλιν ζυγῷ δουλείας ἐνέχεσθε. 2. Ἴδε ἐγὼ Παῦλος λέγω ὑμῖν ὅτι ἐὰν περιτέμνησθε, Χριστὸς ὑμᾶς οὐδὲν ὠφελήσει. 3 μαρτύρομαι δὲ ὅτι πάλιν παντὶ ἀνθρώπῳ περιτεμνομένῳ ὅτι ὀφειλέτης ἐστὶν ὅλον τὸν νόμον ἑποιῆσαι. 4 κατηγγήθητε ἀπὸ Χριστοῦ, οἵτινες ἐν νόμῳ δικαιοῦσθε, τῆς χάριτος ἐξεπέσατε.

For freedom Christ has set us free; stand firm therefore and do not become subject again to a yoke of slavery. Now I, Paul, say to you that if you receive circumcision, Christ will be of no benefit to you. I testify again to every man who receives circumcision that he is a debtor to keep the whole law. You have been released from Christ, you who would be justified by the law; have fallen from grace. For we, in the Spirit, by faith eagerly await the hope of righteousness. For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision is of any force, but faith working through love.

As in Gal 3:3, Paul seems to present a strict warning against becoming circumcised. Again, the question is whether or not Paul has changed his mind or is inconsistent. In Rom 3:1-2, Paul says that circumcision is of benefit. Here however, Paul states that circumcision will be of no benefit or value. The question is benefit with respect to what – as a *sign* or *seal* of the righteousness produced by faith or as the *means* of producing justified or righteous standing?

In Romans, Paul asserts that for those who do have faith, circumcision does serve as a seal or sign of the righteousness produced through faith. He may not wish, however to highlight this particular point to the Galatians since they do not seem to have quite grasped the difference between being justified through faith and seeking justification through circumcision and the flesh.

Paul here uses the imagery of slavery to bring home to the predicament that the Galatians are facing.³⁶ He again presents the either/or option. Those in Christ are Christ's freedmen.³⁷ Those, however, who reject Christ will be released from Christ's service and left, therefore, without benefit. They will thus become debtors to the law – a debt that they cannot pay. This, in turn, would place them back under the "yoke of slavery." Moreover, as Paul has already explained, such a situation would lead, ultimately, to death.

Paul is not suggesting, however, that the yoke of bondage is physical circumcision or the law itself but rather the belief that becoming circumcised and

³⁶ Of course, if those in the Galatian community were freedmen or the children of freedmen Paul's previous discussion regarding the two covenants one of the bondwoman and one of the free and now regarding the yoke of slavery would have had personal resonance.

³⁷ It may be noted that in Gal 1:10 Paul, presents himself as Christ's servant.

following the law perfectly would provide justified standing before God.³⁸ For Paul, the only way to properly keep the commandments and to be free is to walk in the spirit and to have faith in the promises of God, just as Abraham did.

2.11 Why Should Those Who Advocate Physical Circumcision Be “Cut Off”? (Gal 5:7, 12)

Later in verse 12 of chapter 5, Paul seems to exclaim: “I wish those who unsettle you would be cut off!” This comment is certainly directed at Paul’s opponents. It is sometimes read, however, as an indication of Paul’s disapproval of physical circumcision for the Galatians and *pars toto*, the Gentile community or the entire body of believers (both Gentiles and Jews alike). As will be argued, however, Paul here expresses a desire that those who unsettle the Galatians be “cut off,” not because he objects to the practice of physical circumcision but rather because he deems the particular doctrine of circumcision advocated by his opponents to be anathema. There are, moreover, several senses in which Paul wishes his opponents would be “cut off.”

³⁸ See also Acts 15:10.

2.11.1 Cut off from the Race

The most immediate sense of what Paul means in Gal 5:12 is that the Galatians were “running well,” as if in a race, but that someone has cut across the path causing them to stumble. Paul’s statement seems to suggest that since his opponents are causing the Galatians to stumble, they themselves ought to be disqualified from the race.³⁹

2.11.2 The Eunuch

Paul, in Gal 5:12, also seems to be expressing a wish, however, that his opponents would mutilate themselves. Some suggest that he would like them to castrate themselves.⁴⁰ This, indeed, is what seems to have been practiced by the priests of Cybele, the Galli, and is one possible interpretation.

Technically, however, the term “castration,” refers to the cutting off or removal of the testicles. The specific verb that Paul uses in 5:12, however, ἀποκόψονται, is also found in the LXX Deut 23:2 (MT 32:2):

οὐκ εἰσελεύσεται θλαδίας καὶ ἀποκεκομμένος εἰς ἐκκλησίαν
κυρίου

A castrated (θλαδίας) and cut-off one (ἀποκεκομμένος) will not enter the congregation of the Lord

³⁹ Paul may be alluding here to the *hysplex*, a mechanism used in tracks in order to prevent runners from false starts.

⁴⁰ See, for example, Barclay, “Mirror Reading,” in *The Galatians Debate*, 369.

As may be seen, the word for one who has been castrated is θλαδίας while the word used for one who has undergone penectomy is ἀποκεκομμένος. Since Paul uses the term ἀποκόψονται in 5:12, it would seem that he is suggesting penectomy rather than castration. Since, moreover, according to this verse in Deut, those who have their member cut are barred from the assembly, it may be offered that what Paul is also actually suggesting is that those who were insisting on circumcision as a condition for entering the community should themselves be cut off from the assembly.⁴¹

Also, as mentioned earlier, Philo seems to argue that removal of the entire foreskin allows for the better travel of the sperm and thus facilitating greater fertility. In light of such a notion, Paul may be arguing that, rather than having a greater flow of seed, the spiritual seed of those preaching circumcision should be “cut off.” In other words, those who are not of the Seed (that is, Christ – 3:16) and are seeking to prevent others from becoming part of the Seed ought not have any seed of their own – that is, by having both their seed and their entire member cut off.⁴²

⁴¹ See also Martinus C. Boers, *Galatians: A Commentary* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011), 326

⁴² Paul may be hinting at this since there is a movement in his discussion from discussion of the “Seed” (Gal 3:16) to “heir” (Gal 3:29), to “fruit” (Gal 5:22). Paul specifically presents himself as in travail until Christ, that is, the Seed, would be formed in the Galatians (Gal 4:19). Those who are of the Seed, that is, Christ Jesus, have crucified the flesh with its passions and its desires (Gal 5:24, Rom 13:14) and will thus produce the fruit of the spirit (Gal 5:22).

2.11.3 Divine Severance

In relation to this idea, it may be also recalled that in Gen 17:14, the penalty for not being physically circumcised is divine severance. Paul thus seems to be expressing a wish that those insisting on circumcision as a means of justification and perfection and thus troubling the Galatians be “cut off” in the sense of being divinely severed from the world to come.⁴³

2.11.4 *Periah* vs. *Milah*

Finally, it may be suggested that Paul, in Gal 5:12, expresses a polemic against the practice of *periah*. It seems reasonable that Paul’s opponents, who placed such an emphasis on the rite of circumcision would have (along with Philo, Josephus and others of their day) also advocated *periah*. Since it is difficult to reverse, *periah* would have been understood as a way to “secure” one’s identity.

As mentioned earlier, however, from what may be gleaned from 1 Cor 7:18, Paul seems to have understood circumcision to be *milah*. He may thus have viewed *periah* as extreme. Whereas, for Philo, *periah* represented the removal of “conceit,” for Paul it may have represented the very manifestation of conceit and trusting in the “flesh.” If so, then to submit to *periah*, in Paul’s view, would be to place the Galatians in danger of being counted among the ἀποκεκομμένος of Deut 32:1 and thus in danger of being barred from the assembly. His wish in Gal 5:12 regarding these trouble-makers, may be read then in the following sense: “If the removal of more flesh than required seems more righteous to you, you might as well as go all

⁴³ A point first indicated to me by Prof. Daniel R. Schwartz.

the way and cut the whole thing off!" Via castigation of his opponents, Paul, of course, delivers a sharp warning to the Galatians themselves. The message is urgent not only because of the threat he perceives to the spiritual well-being of those in Galatia but also due to the imminent permanent physical ramifications involved in submitting to the message of the opponents.

The possibility of a polemic against *periah* in Gal 5:12 might be further supported by a reading of Phil 3:2. In Philippians, Paul represents himself as well as those in the community at Philippi as the περιτομή. This is contrasted to others who he labels τὴν κατατομήν. Whereas "circumcision" (περιτομή) seems to signify that which is cut *around* (περι), κατατομήν seems to suggest that which is cut *down* (κατα). Indeed, the term κατατομήν is often translated "mutilation."⁴⁴ Although Paul could be using the word in a figurative sense, it is also possible that he is using it in order to refer to *periah*. As with the Galatians, he may thus be warning the Philippians against specific teachings concerning circumcision that he considers to be dangerous not only spiritually but also physically.

Of course, again, just as with the Galatians, Paul may also be warning the Philippians to beware of those who would try to insistent upon circumcision as a method of controlling the passions or as a kind of apotropaic device. Thus, it might be noted that a tintinnabulum (dating between the first century BC- first century CE), was found in the shape of gladiator with a panther (or dog) shaped phallus holding a

⁴⁴ See, for example, discussion by Helmut Koester in "The Purpose of the Polemic of a Pauline Fragment," *NTS* 8.4 (1984): 317-32.

knife in his hand as if to do battle with the animal.⁴⁵ The chime seems to portray an individual at war with himself and his inflamed passions. Perhaps Paul's warning to those at Philippi in Phil 3:2 against circumcision ("Watch out for the dogs! Watch out for the dirty-doers! Watch out for the one cut-down/cutter-down!") might allude to just such a device.

2.12 Is Physical Circumcision Really "Nothing"?

Paul then states that "in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision is of any force, but faith working through love" (5:6). Later, in 6:15 he similarly states: "For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision is anything but a new creation." Again, for Paul, there are only two ways to seek justification – through faith or without faith. For those who do not have faith but seek, rather, to become circumcised as a *means* of justification, circumcision will result in coming under the yoke of bondage. On the other hand, in the case of those of faith, the state of physical circumcision or uncircumcision is of no force with regard to the matter of justification, the only thing that matters is that "faith working through love" (5:6) or being "a new creation" in Christ (6:15). Again, it is not the rite of physical circumcision that Paul finds problematic but rather the idea that circumcision was somehow of value for justification.

⁴⁵ For the image see Catherine Jones, *Sex or Symbol: Erotic Images of Greece and Rome* (London: British Museum Press, 1982), 64.

2.13 Did Paul Change his Stance on Circumcision between the Writing of Galatians and Romans?

Some scholars suggest that Paul's thinking shifted over time from a negative view of the law in Galatians to a more positive one in Romans. Thus, even if the present reading of Paul on the topic of circumcision in Romans might be granted some degree of merit, it would not be considered as having application for Galatians.

Hübner, for example, suggests that Paul initially expresses a negative attitude toward the law in Galatians. Prior to writing Romans, however, he receives counsel from James. Thereafter, he softens his view toward the law. This more mollified stance is expressed in Romans.⁴⁶ Hübner's appraisal of Paul's treatment of the law in Galatians, however, is predicated to a certain extent on a particular reading of Gal 3:19. Whereas most take ἁγγέλων in Gal 3:19 to be a reference to the angelic host, Hübner understands the term as a reference to demons. Hübner thus assumes that Paul must have considered the law, though ultimately given by God, to have been delivered through malevolent powers.⁴⁷

If Paul, however, had intended to specify demons in Gal 3:19, he certainly could have used the term δαιμονίων as in 1 Cor 10:20. What might be suggested briefly here is that understanding the term ἁγγέλων as a reference, not to demons, nor to the heavenly angels, as is most often assumed, but rather to priests and prophets better coheres with the general scheme regarding the administration of the law found in the Bible and, arguably, makes much better sense Gal 3:19-20. In

⁴⁶ Hübner, *Law in Paul's Thought*.

⁴⁷ Hübner, *The Law in Paul's Thought*, 29-30.

other words, Paul's attitude toward the law is not as negative in Gal 3 as Hübner suggests.

Schnelle likewise understands Paul to have moved from a more negative attitude toward the law in Galatians to a more positive one in Romans. Whereas Hübner suggests an entirely hypothetical situation (he conjectures that Paul changed his mind in response to the intervention of James), Schnelle posits that Paul's thought developed in light of his personal experience and ministry work. In Schnelle's view, Paul, in Galatians, presents faith in opposition to circumcision. By the time of the writing of Romans, however, Paul considers circumcision to retain its value albeit not as a "privilege" for the Jew.⁴⁸

As discussed previously, however, there is a critical difference between the two letters in terms of the respective audiences involved – one is written to a community that is commended for its faith and the other to a community chastised for its lack of faith. In Paul's view, those in Galatia were not yet spiritually well-formed (Gal 3:19) and were placing far too much emphasis on the rite of circumcision. Indeed, Paul indicates that he had previously warned the Galatians about the danger of another gospel than the one he himself preached (Gal 1:9). The Galatians, however, had failed to heed Paul's first warning. Thus, this particular

⁴⁸ See Schnelle, *The Apostle Paul*, 565. On the specific matter of circumcision see Schnelle, *Wandlung im paulinischen Denken*, 65. Lüdemann, meanwhile, suggests that Paul, when writing 1 Thessalonians and Galatians, considered Jews who had not accepted Christ as being excluded from the plan of God. In Lüdemann's view, Paul following the success of the Gentile mission, changed to the view that God had a plan for Jewish inclusion. See Lüdemann, *Paulus und das Judentum*, 22-35 and 42.

letter was not the appropriate forum for Paul to taut the benefit or value of physical circumcision. The apostle's goal was precisely to deemphasize circumcision and not encourage the community further in the direction of misplaced trust in the fleshly rite.

In terms of Romans, however, the situation was different. From what may be gleaned from his address, Paul considered those in Rome to be spiritually mature and grounded in faith (Rom 1:8). Since Paul affirms circumcision as a sign of the righteousness of faith and since he considers the Romans to have faith, he is able to affirm the benefit or value of physical circumcision to the Roman audience.

Some shift in Paul's thinking may, however, be detected in Gal 2:2. In this verse Paul states that he laid before the apostles the gospel which he preaches lest somehow he should be "running or had run in vain." The expression of doubt seems rather strange given Paul's robust claim of apostleship from his mother's womb (Gal 1:1,11-12). What may be suggested is that Paul, in Gal 2:2, is not suggesting that he had been in doubt about his apostleship or the nature or identity of the messiah.

Rather, what may be surmised is that prior to going to Jerusalem, Paul had already shifted away from preaching "circumcision" and begun teaching that circumcision was not requirement for justification and entry into the Abrahamic covenant. He was not, however, entirely sure about this position. He thus conferred with the Jerusalem based apostles about the matter. Once the Jerusalem apostles confirm his view, Paul remains consistent in his message – circumcision was not, nor indeed ever had been, necessary for justification. This does not mean, however,

that Paul did not hold there to be on-going value for the rite as a sign of the righteousness of faith.

While proper treatment of the question of development between Galatians and Romans would entail discussion of issues of chronology (including the reliability of Acts and its connection to the Pauline epistles) as well as specific comparisons and special attention to certain loci, such, for example, as Gal 3, what may be initially ventured is that differences between the two letters are a function more of audience and circumstance than of fundamental doctrine or thought.

3. 1 Corinthians 7:17-20

Having addressed Romans, Galatians and Phil 3:2 there remains one further passage to consider – 1 Cor 7:17-20. The brevity and formulaic nature of Paul's address of the topic of circumcision suggests that he has already discussed the matter with the Corinthian community. As will be seen, however, these verses, in some respects, seem the most challenging to decipher. The passage reads as follows:

18 περιτετμημένος τις ἐκλήθη, μὴ ἐπισπάσθω· ἐν ἀκροβυστία
κέκληταί τις, μὴ περιτεμνέσθω.

19 ἡ περιτομή οὐδέν ἐστιν καὶ ἡ ἀκροβυστία οὐδέν ἐστιν, ἀλλὰ
τήρησις ἐντολῶν θεοῦ.

20 ἕκαστος ἐν τῇ κλήσει ἧ ἐκλήθη, ἐν ταύτῃ μενέτω.

18 Were you circumcised at the time of your call? Do not seek to undergo epispasm. Were you called in foreskin? Do not seek to become circumcised. 19 The circumcision is nothing and the foreskin is nothing but observing the commandments of God (is something/is what matters). 20 In whatever (state) of the calling you were called, in that remain.

It certainly seems here as though Paul is saying that circumcision is “nothing” and that those who are uncircumcised should not seek circumcision but remain as they are. What, however, might be the nature of the situation in Corinth and how might it illuminate Paul’s statements here? In the next sections, an attempt will be made to address these questions.

3.1 Remain Circumcised/Uncircumcised Permanently or for the Time Being?

As argued regarding Romans, Paul, in presenting the example of Abraham seemed to indicate that it is possible to be justified and then to become circumcised at a later time. In light of this, it may be suggested that Paul is not saying that the Corinthians should *never* undergo circumcision but that they should concentrate first on “observing the commandments” and defer circumcision to a later point.

As may be noted, there is, in 1 Cor 7:18, a similarity in phraseology to what is found in Gal 5:6 and 6:15. As mentioned earlier, Paul is not saying in Galatians that circumcision is “nothing” but that is nothing with regard to justification – what matters with regard to justification is “faith working through love” (Gal 5:6) and becoming a “new creation” (Gal 6:15) in Christ. Similarly, Paul seems to be

reminding the Corinthians that justified standing before God is not based on circumcision.

Again, as seen in Romans, Paul considers faith to be the starting point. Physical circumcision, meanwhile, is not an on-going performance but a single act, one that is performed at a specific point in time. Those who, however, have faith and are, through Christ, a “new creation” (Gal 6:15) observe the commandments (1 Cor 7:19) on a daily basis. As discussed previously, Paul’s point in Romans is not that physical circumcision is unimportant but rather that it is of *secondary* importance to keeping the commandments (Rom 2:25). In Paul’s view, circumcision in the flesh only has value if one is also circumcised in the heart and a doer of the law (Rom 2:13, 29). If one is not keeping the other commandments there is no point in becoming circumcised. It is not taking the sign so much as doing what the sign signifies, namely, walking in faith and keeping the commandments that matters.

3.2 By Different “Callings” is Paul Suggesting Different Commandments for Gentiles and Jews?

Hans Conzelmann understands the question as to whether one was circumcised or uncircumcised at the time of the “call” to be a reference to the whether or not the individual was a Jew or a Gentile (1 Cor 7:18).⁴⁹ The difficulty, however, with this reading is that not all of those who had been circumcised would have been Jews, while some Jews might not have been circumcised. The time of the “call” thus seems to refer to the time at which an individual was “called” by Christ. In other words, Paul seems to be suggesting that whatever state the individual was

⁴⁹ Hans Conzelmann, *1 Corinthians* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1975), 126.

in at the time they were called by Jesus, whether circumcised or uncircumcised, that is the state in which they should remain. As will be seen, this latter reading better explains the overall context of the passage.

3.3 Paul's Advice to Those Seeking to Become Circumcised

In verse 18, Paul tells those who were uncircumcised not to seek to become circumcised. On the one hand, he might be addressing those who had never been circumcised. As mentioned, however, the Corinthian community seems to have included a good number of slaves and freedman. As argued, moreover, it might be that at least some of the slaves in these communities had been circumcised at one point but had been subjected to epispasm. Thus, of those who were “foreskinned” there may have been two groups: 1) those who had never been circumcised 2) those who had been circumcised at some point but who, subsequently chose to undergo epispasm (desiring to avoid social stigma, assimilate, etc...) or, as slaves, either willingly or by force, underwent epispasm.

In both cases, there may have been a desire to become circumcised for the same reasons addressed earlier: justification, righteousness, salvation, official status as “Jew.” Paul’s message, however, is that keeping the commandments is the most important matter. He does not tell these individuals they should *never* become circumcised, only that this is not the most pressing or important point. As argued earlier regarding Galatians, according to Paul, those who are circumcised are expected to keep the commandments. Thus the Corinthians should remain, for the

time-being, uncircumcised, concentrate on learning and observing the commandments and worry about becoming circumcised later.

3.4 Paul's Advice to Those Seeking Epispasm

There is, however, an element in 1 Corinthians 7 not seen earlier. In the previous epistles examined, those who had been physically circumcised seemed to be boasting in their circumcision. Here, however, prior to even addressing those who wish to become circumcised, Paul addresses those who – far from boasting in their circumcision – seem, rather, to wish to undo their circumcision! Understanding to whom and why Paul might have given this directive may aid, however, in clarifying Paul's primary concern.

3.4.1 Epispasm for Social and/or Economic Reasons?

One possible reason that those in Corinth desired to undergo epispasm would have been, as with certain of the Jerusalmmites in the days of the Maccabees, to avoid any possible stigma encountered in larger community and blend in with the greater society. Perhaps, moreover, from previous discussions, these individuals understood Paul to have been dismissive of the need for circumcision in terms of standing before God. Since, in any case, they had already fulfilled the commandment in having been circumcised and since physical circumcision was not necessary for those in Christ and since, moreover, it constituted a blight on their personal body image or a hindrance to social interactions in the wider community, they sought to undo or hide their circumcision.

As suggested by Brad Braxton those in Corinth might not have been simply seeking to avoid stigma or mere assimilation but rather upward social mobility.⁵⁰ If so, Paul's command that these individuals remain circumcised seems an affirmation of the value of circumcision or a sign of his discouragement against the idea of assimilating into the larger society or the seeking of greater social stature. In other words, it is possible that Paul was thus saying – don't try to avoid stigma, don't try to become assimilated, don't try to better your social and economic position– just focus on keeping the commandments of God.

The problem, however, with this line of reasoning is that in the very next lines (1 Cor 7:21), Paul suggests that those in Corinth should not worry about being slave but if they could get their freedom they should do so. Why would Paul support the Corinthians in the latter case but not the former? Could he not simply permit people to undergo epispasm, particularly if circumcision was “nothing” anyway? If anything, Paul's statements would seem not to be a corrective but rather a strengthening of the sentiment regarding the lack of importance of circumcision and thus permissibility of epispasm.

⁵⁰ Brad Ronnell Braxton, *The Tyranny of Resolution: 1 Corinthians 7:17-24* (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2000), 116.

3.4.2 Epispasm for Religious Reasons?

It may be argued that those who Paul addressed in Corinth were seeking to undergo epispasm not so much with social or economic betterment in mind but rather with the thought that this would somehow be considered “something” before God. This, of course, raises a major difficulty – why, if the biblical commandment prescribes physical circumcision, would someone seek to undergo epispasm effectively undoing their circumcision as if it would count as “something” before God?

According to the book of Acts when Paul came to Ephesus, he found individuals who had been baptized in the name of John (Acts 19:3). They apparently had not yet heard the message of Jesus as the Christ. In response, however, to Paul’s preaching, that is, at the “time of their call,” they become baptized a *second* time in the name of the Lord Jesus (Acts 19:5).

Certainly, a similar consideration could have been given to circumcision. In other words, those in Corinth who had been circumcised *prior* to their acceptance of Christ may have felt that because their circumcision had been performed *prior* to their acceptance of Christ, their initial circumcision did not count. Since so much seemed to be at stake in terms of circumcision, is it possible that they wished to undo the circumcision they had already undergone – not for the sake of actually remaining uncircumcised but rather in order to become recircumcised *in Christ*?

While this possibility might seem far-fetched, there is reason that such a situation is altogether plausible. First, rabbinic texts suggest the practice of

recircumcision. For example, *Gen Rab* 46.13 suggests that those who were circumcised in the time of Bar Kokbha were recircumcised:

He hath broken my covenant. This refers to one whose circumcision is disguised. It was taught: He whose circumcision is disguised must recircumcise. R. Judah said: He does not recircumcise, because it is suppressed foreskin. Said they to R. Judah: Yet there were many in the days of the son of Kosiba who recircumcised and yet gave birth to children after that. Hence it is written, He shall surely be circumcised – even four or five times: He hath broken my covenant – viz. he whose circumcision is disguised. (Freedman)⁵¹

Note that the passage suggests that recircumcision was possible even four or five times. In other words, if one were to be circumcised and then becoming willingly for social or other reasons or unwillingly uncircumcised, then one was obligated to undergo circumcision again – even four or five times. While this might seem excessive, it is important here to consider that willingness on the part of some to undergo various bodily treatments in the framework of their respective religious convictions. The Galli, as mentioned, were willing to undergo complete castration in order to serve the Cybele.

In terms of circumcision, a modern example might serve as an example. In his comedic one-man play, Yisrael Campbell (ne' Christopher Campbell) claims to have undergone circumcision not once, not twice but three times. Why? As he

⁵¹ See also *BT Yeb* 47b, 72a regarding a *mashuk* during the days of Bar Koziba.

explains, on his spiritual quest, he moved from one sect of Judaism to another. Each time, however, he was required to undergo yet another circumcision because the previous one, having been performed under different auspices, did not count.

Consider the following line from the play:

The Rabbi said, "You're going to have to do *everything* again." I said, "I'll do a third circumcision; but I want you to know – three circumcision is not a religious covenant. It's a fetish."⁵²

To be clear, although Campbell refers to all three procedures as "circumcision," a *periah* circumcision was performed only the first time. The two subsequent procedures would have involved only the drawing of blood – what in rabbinic literature is termed *meshikat hadam*.

In the case, however, of *milah* circumcision, it would be possible to draw down the foreskin and then cut the foreskin a second time. (It is not that the foreskin can never be drawn down in the case of *periah*. In certain cases it might be possible but it is more difficult to do and takes a much longer time.) In order to become recircumcised, however, it would, of course, have been necessary to first draw down the foreskin. In light of this, it may be suggested that Paul, in counseling those in Corinth not to undergo epispasm, is addressing those who had been

⁵² A tag line from the play – "His name is Yisrael Campbell, (the artist formerly known as Christopher), and this is his story – a spiritual journey stretching across four decades, two continents, and three circumcisions." See: <http://circumciseplay.com/about>.

considering becoming recircumcised as a way of being more secure in their identity in Christ.

Indeed, this would specifically explain Paul's inquiry regarding the state of the individual "at the time of their call." That is, those seeking epispasm may have been concerned that they had already undergone circumcision "at the time of their call." Thus, just as in the case of Yisrael Campbell, their concern would have stemmed from the fact that, since the rite was performed *prior* to their acceptance of the Christ at the time of their call, their first circumcision did not actually count.

Indeed, it might be worth noting that the Corinthians may have held a certain affinity for particular self- identifications. Paul seems to indicate that those in Corinth tended to self-identify with the particular preachers (1 Cor 3). Paul rebukes them for these divisions pointing out that they actually belonged to Christ and, ultimately, God (1 Cor 3:4).)

Thus, is it possible that some in Corinth wanted to draw down their foreskins once again in order to become recircumcised – just as Yisrael Campbell underwent a new "circumcision" each time he wanted to enter as an official member of a different Jewish group.

If so, it is the idea of epispasm with the goal of recircumcision which Paul addresses. His message to such individuals is: "Don't put so much emphasis on your physical circumcision. It is sufficient that you were circumcised once already - even if it was prior the time of your call. Now concentrate on keeping the commandments!"

4. Summary

As argued in the present chapter, Paul was not opposed to circumcision *per se*. Rather he objected to the idea of placing of faith or sense of identity in physical circumcision rather than Christ. As has been seen, the issues in each of the communities he dealt with were slightly different. Some in Rome, for example, may have been actually reluctant to become circumcised. Those in Galatia, on the other hand, may have been anxious to do so while those in Corinth may have been seeking, perhaps, to do so once again! Paul's main concern was to make sure that those in his communities were staking their identity in Christ and not in their state of physical circumcision or uncircumcision. He strenuously objects to the notion that circumcision is required for justification, receipt of the Abrahamic and spiritual perfection, are as a protection against death or evil placing emphasis instead on faith and the keeping of the commandments.

Chapter 5

Conclusion

1. Summary

The first chapter set out the key question to be explored in this project, namely, “Did Paul always object to the circumcision of Gentile men?” It also presented various scholarly opinions regarding this question. These may be divided into four main views regarding Paul’s position:

1. Circumcision is no longer applicable to Jew or Gentile since it was fulfilled with the advent of Christ,
(Schriener, Theilman, Dunn, Wright)
2. Circumcision is optional for the Jew but prohibited for the Gentile,
(Sanders)
3. Circumcision remains applicable for the Jew but not for the Gentile
(Tompson, Bockmuehl, Nanos, Fredriksen, Stowers)
4. Circumcision is optional for the Jew and not applicable to the Gentile unless he desires to “become a Jew”
(Segal)

Chapter two consists of three sections devoted to investigation of particular topics considered to be of import for the reading of Romans. The first section explored various reasons for the possible reluctance of men to be circumcised. It was suggested that these would have included concerns in the financial, social and physical realms. Regarding the latter, it was argued that there were two different forms of circumcision in Paul's time and that the proper definition of circumcision was contested. It was also suggested that circumcised slaves sometimes underwent *epispasm* under the auspices of their masters.

Although some scholars suggest that circumcision was an absolute requirement for "becoming a Jew," through an investigation of the relevant sources, it was concluded in the second section that, a diverse spectrum of views actually existed during Paul's time. A case was made that different positions regarding the requirement of circumcision for "becoming a Jew" included the following:

1. Circumcision is required to become one with the people of Jacob or to become a Jew
2. Circumcision is necessary to become a Jew but may be overlooked in cases of mortal danger
3. Circumcision is not necessary to become a Jew but is required or expected to be taken at a *later* point
4. Baptism (not circumcision) is *the* decisive step in becoming a Jew
5. Circumcision is not necessary or is optional in becoming a Jew
6. It is not possible to "become a Jew"

The first position is of greatest import in understanding Paul's opponents while the third and perhaps the fourth for understanding the position of Paul himself. Finally,

the last section of chapter two considered Philo's presentation of Abraham as an exemplar and a "unwritten" or "living law." It was argued that the ways in which Philo describes Abraham mirror his presentation of the proselyte.

Chapter three entails a close reading of Romans. The analysis suggested that Paul's use of the phrase "work of the law" in Rom 2:15 is a reference to the "tablets of the law" mentioned in Ex 32:16. It was argued that Paul understood those who "do the law" to have the tablet of God's law in their hearts. This, moreover, seems to be Paul's understanding of what is meant by "circumcision of the heart."

Special focus was paid to Rom 4:11. It was noted that Paul, drawing upon Gen 17:11 explains that Abraham took circumcision as a "sign" or "seal" of the righteousness or justified standing he had before God by faith. Highlighting Paul's use of a purpose or result clause in the second half of Rom 4:11 it was noted that Paul was making a case that Abraham's circumcision had the purpose of or result of making him a father to both the uncircumcised and the circumcised. In addition, drawing upon the notion of Abraham as an exemplar, it was suggested that Paul understood Abraham to have become, through the very act of circumcision, a father to the uncircumcised via Abraham's example. With this in mind, it was argued that Paul would have actually understood the uncircumcised man of faith to become *eventually* physically circumcised just as Abraham had been, not for the sake of justification but rather, just as in the case of Abraham, as a sign of his righteousness through faith. Paul also expected those who had already been circumcised whether Jews or Gentile (proselytes) to continue to follow Abraham's example by walking in the footsteps of his faith.

The fourth chapter considers Paul's treatment of circumcision in Galatians, Philippians and Corinthians. It was suggested that those in Rome had a strong faith in Christ but may have been unsure about the value of physical circumcision or were, perhaps, somewhat reluctant to become circumcised. In light of this, Paul laid out the positive value of circumcision as a sign or seal of the righteousness of faith. Those in Galatia, on the other hand were looking to the rite of circumcision and not to Christ for their justification and spiritual perfection. Paul considers this a fatal error and thus presents the Galatians as being in danger of being cut off from Christ and returning to bondage. Paul's polemic, in both Galatians and Philippians, was directed against the notion that the rite of circumcision was necessary for justification, spiritual perfection and protection as well as against the practice of *periah*.

A case was then made that those in Corinth were looking to circumcision for their sense of identity. Since the community included slaves and, most likely, freedmen as well, some may have been circumcised but, at some point, had undergone epispasm. These individuals were seeking to become circumcised again. Others had been circumcised prior to their acceptance of Christ and were thus seeking to undergo epispasm in order to *redo* their circumcision *in Christ*. Paul's advice to both groups is not to put so much emphasis on circumcision - since circumcision was of no value with respect to one's place in Christ, it was sufficient to be circumcised just once and that the main focus of those in Corinth ought to be on the keeping of the commandments.

2. Conclusions and Implications of Findings

The general conclusion derived from the preceding is that Paul was not opposed to Gentile circumcision in every circumstance. Paul did not consider circumcision necessary for becoming a Jew or entry into the Mosaic covenant but did encourage circumcision to be taken at some point by those who had faith and were doing or performing the law. Though certainly shaped by his understanding of the nature and identity of Jesus of Nazareth, Paul's position regarding circumcision actually falls well within the scope of the Judaism of his day.

Paul's writings on the subject of circumcision reflect, however, a particular inter-Jewish polemic. He indicates that at one time he used to "preach circumcision" (Gal 5:11) but he now no longer does. Since he claims to have been a Pharisee (Phil 3:5), it is most likely a Pharisaic group, and presumably a strict one that he opposes. Other verses such as Acts 15:1 suggest that it was those of the Pharisaic movement who were insisting that circumcision was necessary for salvation. Paul's mention of "leaven" (Gal 5:9) and accusation of "hypocrisy" (Gal 2:13) in Galatians may perhaps also suggest that the doctrine he opposed was a Pharisaic one (see also Matt 16 and 23). He seems, essentially, to have been dealing with a group that claimed to accept Jesus as the Messiah but also considered circumcision and law observance as necessary prerequisites or conditions for justification, salvation and spiritual perfection. For this reason, they were known as those "of the circumcision" just as the Baptists are named for a tenet of import to that denomination. Paul, focusing particularly on the question of justification but also on spiritual perfection, vehemently opposes any notion that circumcision or anything else could be added

to faith in Christ in order to achieve these ends. This, to him, represented the preaching of another gospel (Gal 1:6). For the apostle, the performance of the law was to be an outgrowth of faith in Christ, not an addition to it.

Paul was not suggesting that the physical circumcision was somehow “done away with” or fulfilled with the coming of Christ. Nor was he suggesting it had been eliminated as a matter of national boasting or retained a matter of Jewish national privilege. Rather, in his view, circumcision had been initially given to Abraham as a sign of the righteousness that Abraham had by faith in order to make Abraham the father of both the uncircumcised and circumcised on the basis of faith. Moreover, circumcision was given as an external seal or manifestation of the written law in the heart. This was the original and on-going purpose of circumcision for both Jews and Gentiles alike

What this would ultimately suggest, of course, is that Paul understood both Jews and Gentiles to come under the exact same framework of law – that is, the “law written in the heart” (or “written law in the heart”) that is an expression, ultimately, of the “unwritten law.” It may be suggested that this, for Paul, is actually equivalent to the “law of Christ” (Gal 6:2). Moreover, this law was to be kept only through faith that, in turn, would result in natural fulfillment of the requirements of the Mosaic law.

3. Areas for Future Research

The present work suggests then that Paul may not have been as opposed to circumcision and the Mosaic law as previously thought. Confirmation of this view, however, would require close examination of some of the following areas: 1) the significations and issues pertaining to circumcision not discussed or only briefly treated here, 2) the other “special laws,” 3) Paul’s general treatment of the law

3.1 The Topic of Circumcision

In terms of the topic of circumcision, there is certainly much more that may be explored even in terms of the texts considered. For example, far more might be said regarding Phil 3:1-6. Further texts, moreover, may be engaged. Paul, arguably, for example, implicitly deals with the topic in the latter portion of Romans (overtly mentioning it in Rom 15:8). Meanwhile, specific passages in epistles held to be deutero-Pauline namely, Col 2:11 and Eph 2:11-13, may also be considered for their possible relation to the present reading of Paul on circumcision. Relevant verses and passages in the Gospel of Luke and John and, in particular, the Book of Acts may also be brought into conversation with Paul’s treatment of circumcision.

In addition, although some of the main significations of circumcision were touched upon in this study, focus was directed toward the question of whether or not circumcision was required in order to “become a Jew.” There are other matters, however, that must be further discussed. For example, was the foreskin considered to be a source of uncleanness? At present, one scholarly view seems to hold that it was not, at least in terms of Gentiles. There does seem to be evidence, however, that

this was indeed the case. Some of the relevant texts have been touched upon here but without exploration of this topic. There are many other texts, however, that might be brought to bear on this topic. Clarification of this matter would have import on the understanding of particular issues, with which Paul dealt, such, for example as “the Antioch Incident” and the connection between circumcision and table-fellowship. Research regarding this question as well as others topics relating to circumcision not mentioned or treated here in-depth may be of further help in placing Paul’s treatment of circumcision and the law in greater relief.

3.2 Paul’s Treatment of the Other “Special Laws”¹

The possibility that Paul actually may have expected Gentiles to be circumcised raises other questions. What, for example, about his views on the dietary laws, the Sabbath and festivals - that is the other so-called “special laws of Judaism”? How did Paul expect Gentiles to relate to these laws? Again, as with the circumcision issue, these would have to be considered individually.

Prior to doing so, however, it would be necessary to actually identify which passages in the Pauline corpus relate to these topics. Often, there is a lack of consensus on the precise issue at stake in passages that would seem relevant to the question of the “special laws.” As already discussed, there is, for example, dispute regarding Gal 4:10. Does the passage refer to the biblical Sabbath and festivals or to

¹ In a kind of irony, circumcision, the dietary laws, Sabbath and festival commands as sometimes referred to collectively as “the special laws of Judaism” whereas the English title “On the Special Laws” applies to Philo’s treatise on all of the Mosaic law which he understands to be divided according to the headings of the 10 “words” of the Decalogue and, ultimately, fall either under the command regarding relation to God or to neighbor or to both.

days previously observed in honor or other gods? The present work, as already discussed, argues for the latter on the grounds of Paul's use in Gal 4:10 and positive use of festival terminology elsewhere. Further passages such, for example, as Paul's discussion of "days" in Rom 14: 5-6 have also received conflicting treatments. Do the verses in question refer to Biblical law, oral law or Pharisaic law, or, perhaps, Greco-Roman practice? Various theories have been proposed.² Passages dealing with the dietary issues as found, for example, in Rom 14 have likewise received differing treatments. These matters, however, will need to be properly addressed elsewhere.

3.3 Paul's Treatment of the Law in General

As discussed, the present work calls for a reevaluation of Paul's treatment of the Mosaic law, particularly in, Galatians and Romans. Although Rom 1-4 has been discussed, there is the remainder of Romans to consider. Galatians, of course, must also be evaluated. Paul, of course, says more about the law in the letter than was possible to cover in the present project. Chapter 3, in particular, is crucial. For example, in Gal 3:10, Paul mentions the law being appointed by "angels" and served as a pedagogue leading to Christ (Gal 3:23-25). The way in which these passages and, indeed, the entirety of chapter 3, are interpreted has particular import for the way in which Paul's approach to the law in Galatians is characterized. These must be fully dealt with before the findings of this thesis can be further supported.

² See discussion by Jewett, *Romans*, 844-845

Seeming contradictions between Paul's epistles must also be addressed. For example, Paul makes a bold claim in Phil 3:6 that with respect to the law he was "blameless." In Rom 7:14-25, on the other hand, he seems to suggest, unless speaking rhetorically (or both), that he was a sinner or transgressor of the law. Once again, however, the matter of precise identification must be raised. What law exactly is Paul talking about in each case? Is he speaking of the same law in both instances? An argument can certainly be made that, in terms of the context of each, Paul, in Phil 3:6 is speaking of the Pharisaic law while in Rom 7:14-24, he is speaking about God's law - he considered himself thus blameless with respect to the former but a transgressor with respect to the latter.

Certainly Paul does seem to treat the Mosaic law as less than the "unwritten law" yet he seems to suggest that fulfillment of the latter will result in fulfillment of the former. Moreover, he seems to suggest that the death penalty required by the law has been cancelled through the death of Christ. Further clarification, however, of Paul's understanding between the Mosaic law and the unwritten law is required.

4. An Explanation of the Title

It may be noted that the title of this present work is as follows:

A Seal of Faith: Rereading Paul on Circumcision, Torah and the Gentiles

The first phrase is taken, of course, from Rom 4:12. What is found in Rom 4:12, however is not “seal of faith” but a “seal of the righteousness of faith.” Also, considering the continual use of the term “law” throughout, arguably, the title *should* read, perhaps, instead:

A Seal of the Righteousness of Faith: Rereading Paul on Circumcision, Law and the Gentiles

There are thus two major points on which the present title could be faulted. Both on the attenuation of Paul’s phrasing in Rom 4:12 as well as the use of “Torah” instead of “law.” A brief explanation for the choices is thus warranted.

As has been argued, Paul’s emphasis in his letters is overwhelmingly on the matter of faith. For Paul, there is simply no possibility of righteousness without faith. In his understanding, it is the very root of righteousness. Thus, arguably, circumcision is for Paul a sign or a seal, in some sense, not primarily of righteousness but rather of faith.

Secondly, circumcision is classically considered act that represents a “work” as opposed to “faith.” The present title intended question not the notion that Paul

would have considered circumcision as a “work” in the sense of something *opposed* to faith rather than the very emblem of “faith.” As to the choice of “seal” over “sign,” a “seal” more specifically points to the notion of man as a living document with the law written in his heart.

Regarding use of the term “Torah” it is true that, other than in the first chapter, the term “law” has been used as opposed to “Torah” (or “torah”). The reason for this is that “law” has a somewhat more generic sense in English than “Torah” and, prior to chapter 3 at least, the connection between the Mosaic law (“Torah”) and the Gentiles was not established. As suggested here, there are areas yet to be considered before making the definitive link. Yet, inasmuch as the term “Torah” is somewhat more expansive than “the Mosaic law,” and inasmuch as the preliminary findings of this work do point in the direction of Paul’s application of the “Torah” to the Gentiles, “Torah” has been used in the title. It is hoped that future work will demonstrate that there is, indeed, further merit to this choice.

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